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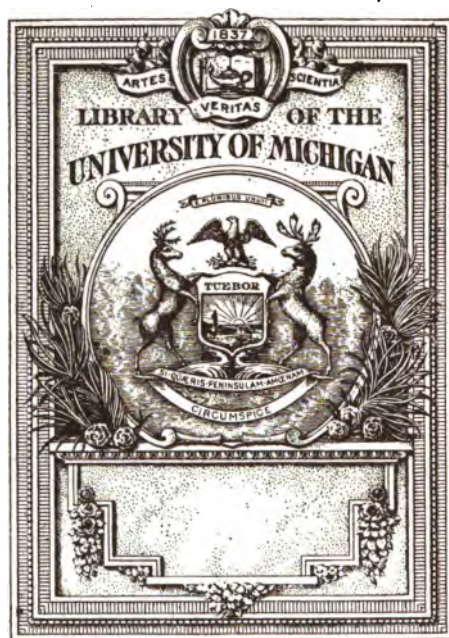
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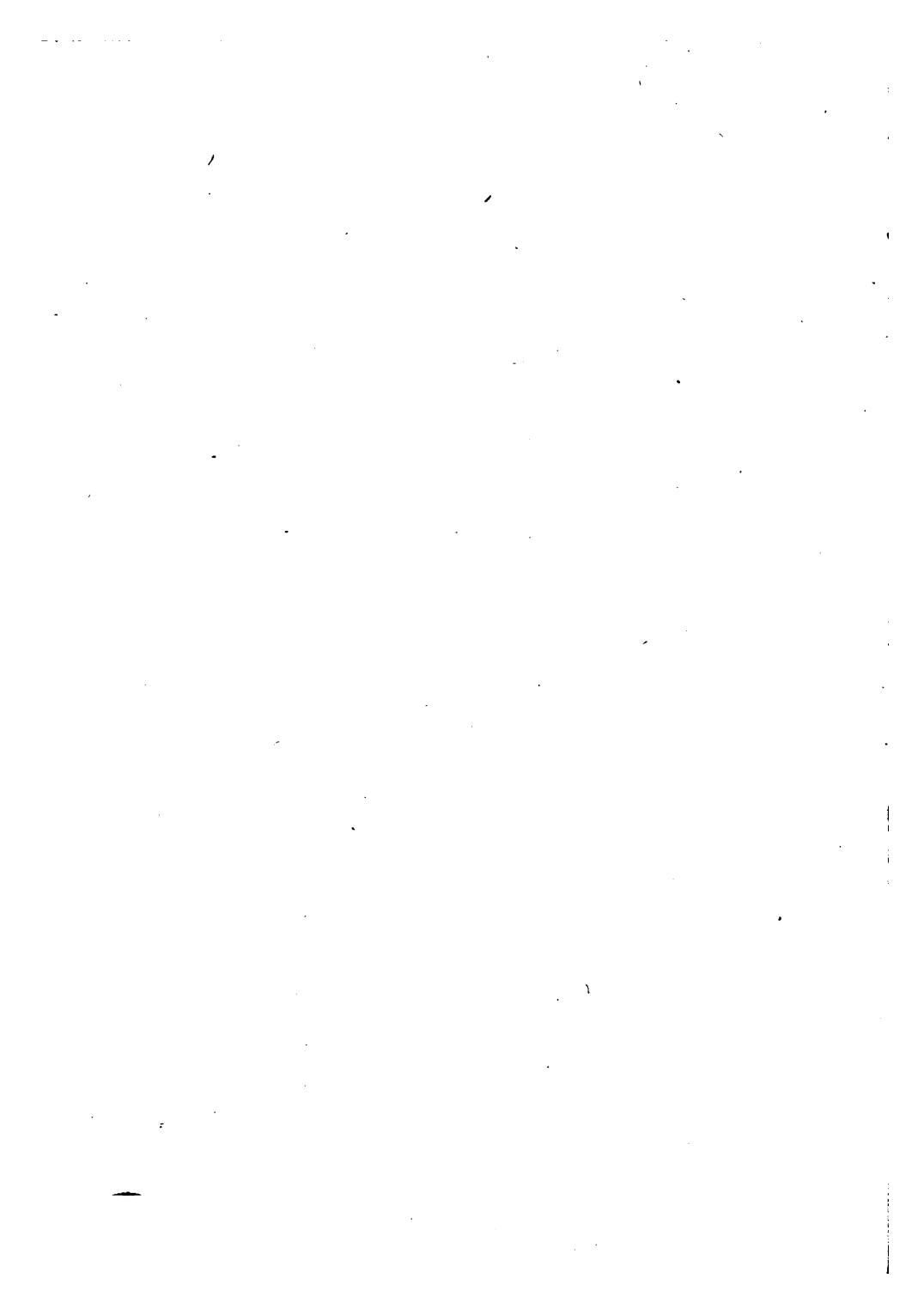
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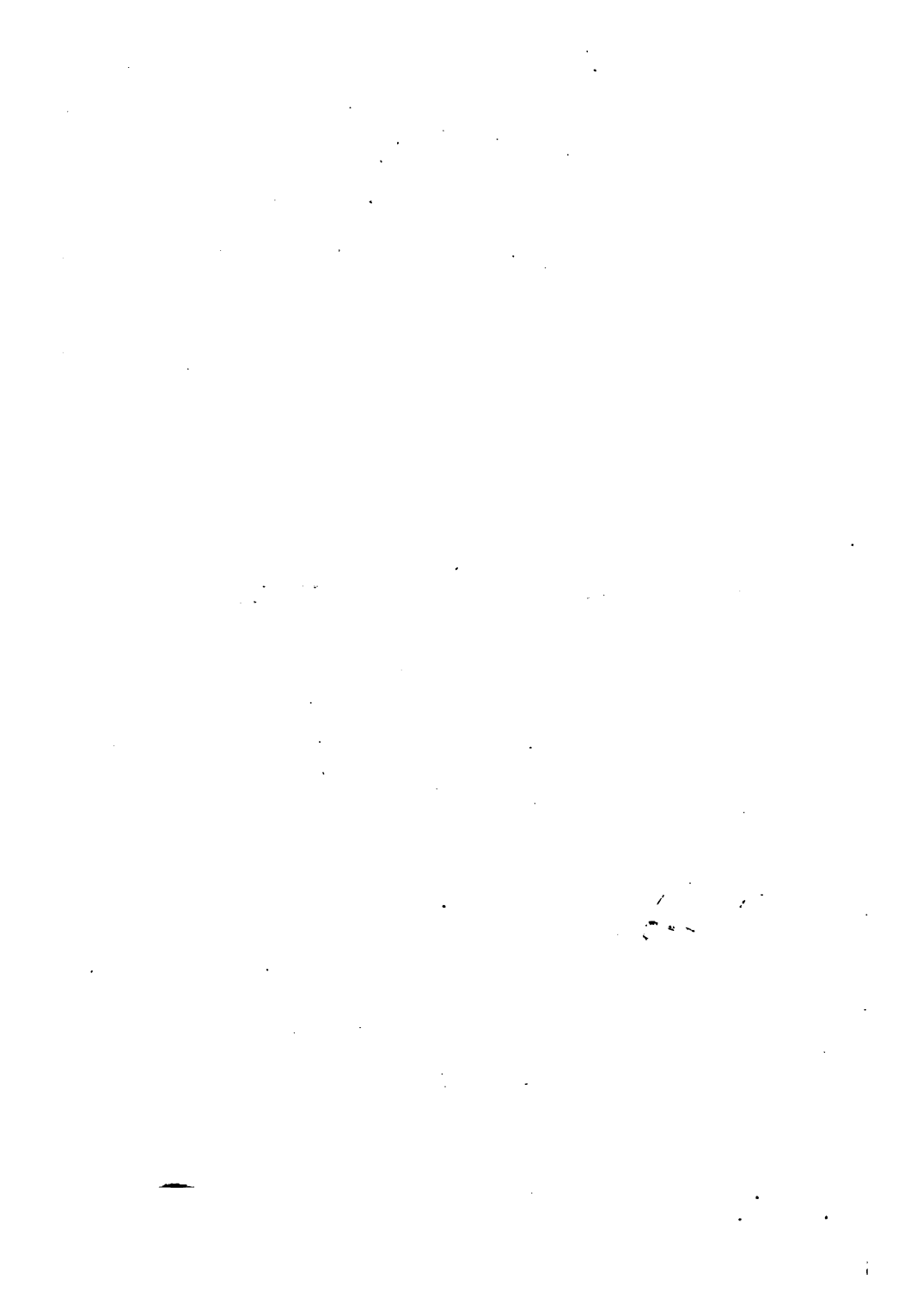


THE SCRIPTURE READER OF ST. MARK'S

St. Mark's

THE SCRIPTURE READER OF ST. MARK'S

St. Mark's



THE SCRIPTURE READER OF ST. MARK'S

authentic BY
K. DOUGLAS KING



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THE MERRIAM COMPANY
67 FIFTH AVENUE

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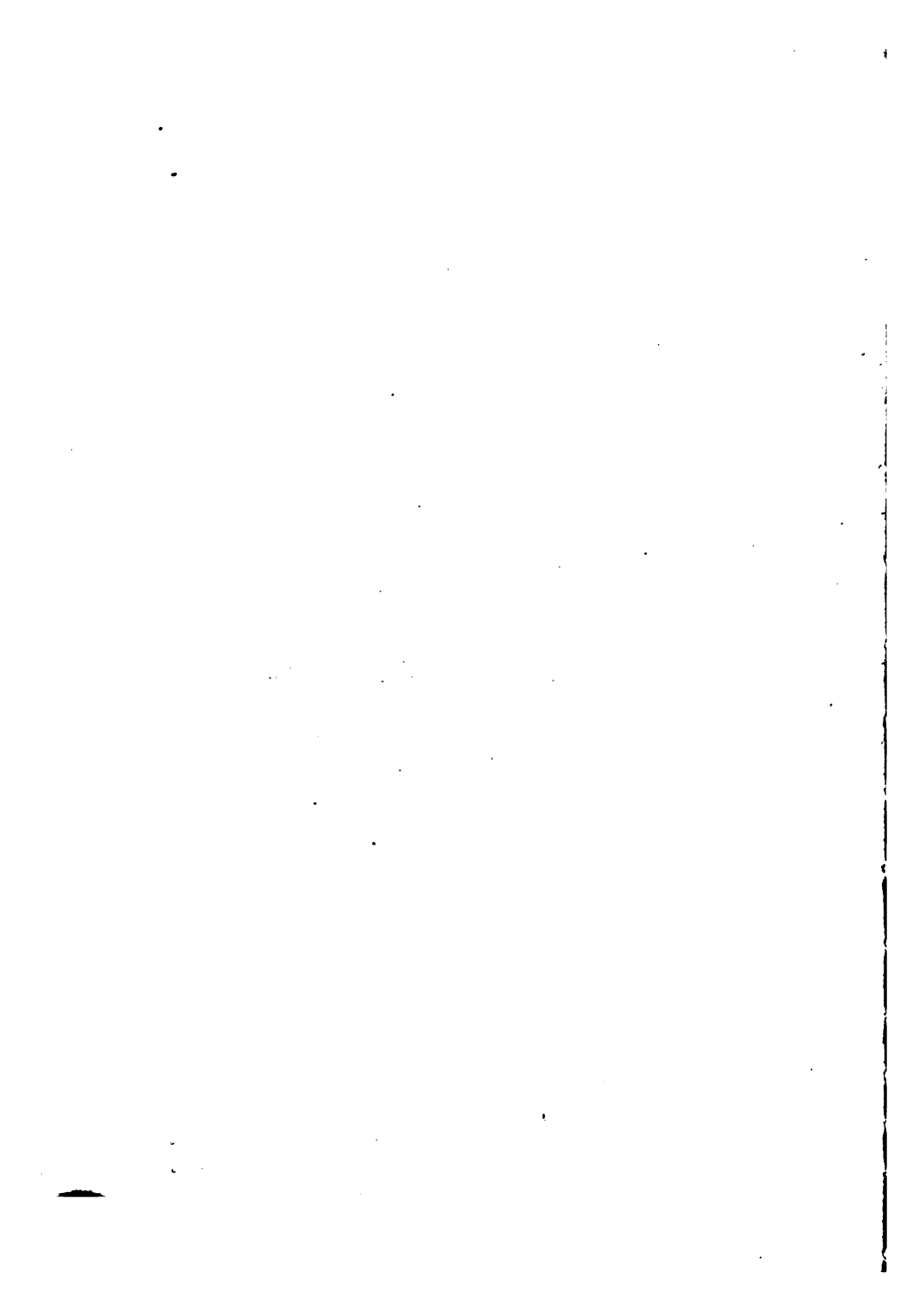
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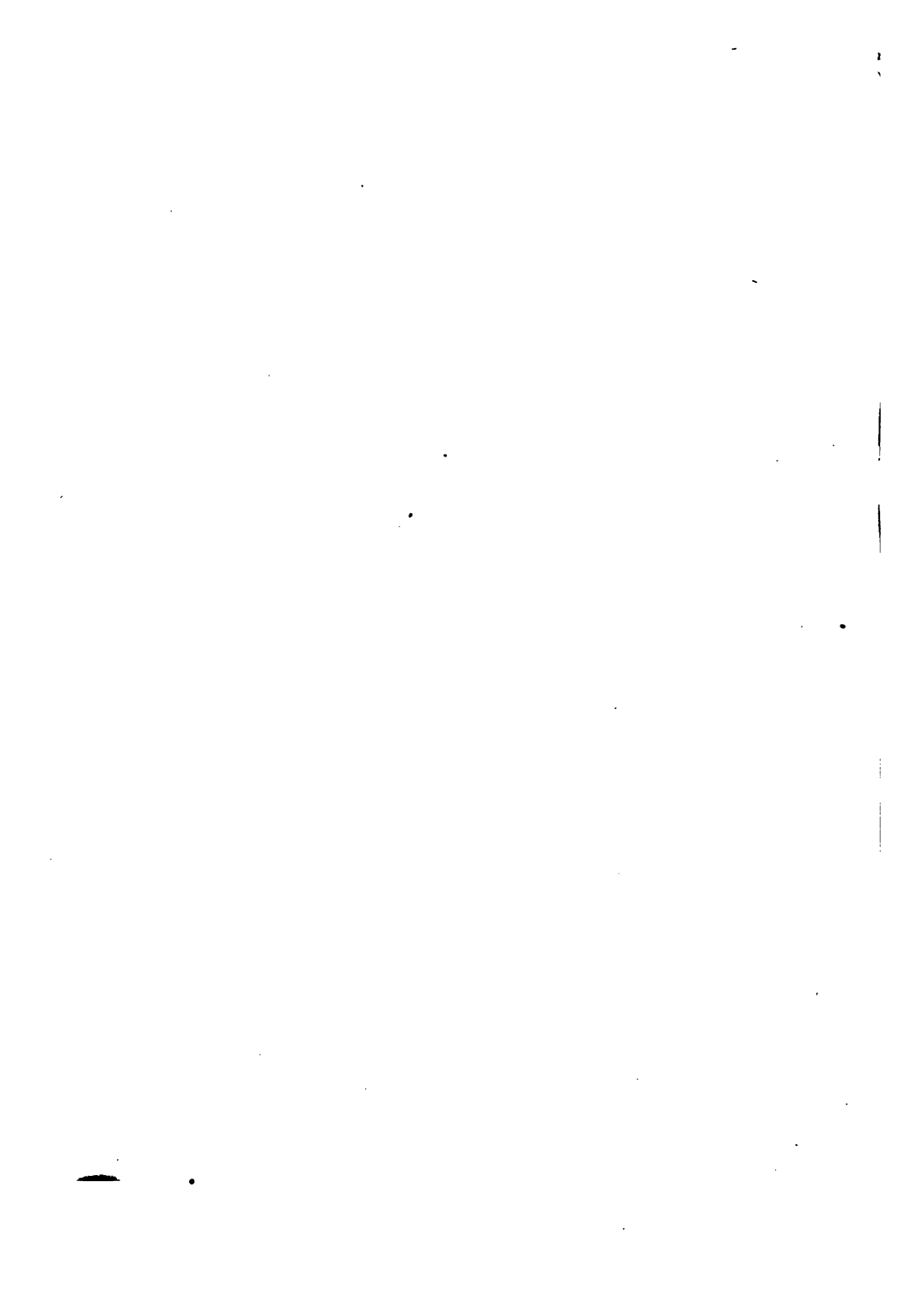
I DEDICATE

The Scripture Reader of St. Mark's



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THE SCRIPTURE READER OF ST. MARK'S.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS EVE.

THE Scripture Reader of St. Mark's stepped, hurriedly, from the door of his dingy lodgings, into the hardly less cheerless street. A devastating wind swept over the city, and there were signs of coming snow in the chilled, bitter air. Twilight had already slipped, unnoticed, into night, and the street lamps flickered dimly above the pavement and the pedestrians abroad. Nearly all the shop windows were shuttered and barred, but the upper parts of houses showed fitful illuminations to such passers-by as were bold enough to raise their heads in the teeth of the biting wind.

2 *The Scripture Reader of St. Mark's.*

Every one walked fast, the fur-coated and those who had no overcoats, alike. It was Christmas Eve, and people were going home. The scripture reader was not going home ; but he was always in a hurry. He rarely walked, in the strict interpretation of the word ; his numerous and varied duties in the parish obliging him to go at a perpetual trot.

These daily exercises of his began at dawn and often did not cease till midnight. A thoughtful observer, perambulating the parish of St. Mark's, might have noticed that its scripture reader was as omnipresent as was drunkenness (St. Mark's had a well-deserved, viler reputation than most other parishes). The scripture reader's movements were unnoticed by the people among whom he dwelt, and for whose sake, as well as for their Maker's, he toiled and fought with want and sin and shame, by night and day, year in, year out.

The vicar of St. Mark's would say of him,

with ponderous warmth, "Mr. Lee is an invaluable man". The curates, poorly paid, over-worked, and with ritualistic aspirations (whose tiniest bud their chief severely nipped each time one showed its head above the surface of their work), had no more time than had the scripture reader to indulge in empty commendation.

They nodded at each other when they passed, if not too much preoccupied, and they gave the scripture reader such directions beyond his usual daily round as the vicar deemed advisable. Apart from that, and the common bond of a charge of thankless sheep (mostly black), Lee, the scripture reader, and his coadjutors in the parish work, were like strangers, each living in a world of his own imagining. Both curates had a home; the scripture reader but a lodging room, whose four cheerless walls he often did not see for twenty hours together.

The curates, like the scripture reader of St. Mark's, were both unmarried men. Too

4 *The Scripture Reader of St. Mark's.*

often Lee had seen the sad results of priests, underpaid and overworked, marrying and begetting families ; and he thoroughly approved the enforced celibacy of his directors. At the same time he was keenly conscious of the saving grace of a home and a family, even to the most stubborn and wayward of his flock.

The sight of others' married homes, and the ring of children's laughter awoke responsive echoes in his heart that were less tender than tinged with bitterness. Even his austere contemplation of drunkards' homes, and the swarms of sin-begotten, ragged, gutter children that hung about him, in his daily rounds, failed to crush out the yearning that a maiden's voice or a child's soft touch engendered.

He rarely allowed himself the luxury of thought. Life was so short, and his life's work so much engrossed his mind and soul and body. Every hour of every day found him employed with others' cares.

After supper (its hour ranged, indifferently, from 7 P.M. to 12'30 at midnight) he would read the books brought home from the parish library. When the print grew dim, with a sigh he would lay down the book. Then, if overpowering weariness did not urge him on to prayer, sustained with difficulty, by his bedside, and thence, to sleep, he would sit up, first blowing out the candle with characteristic prudence, and would draw aside the curtains that shrouded his own life and past career. He rarely durst, even on these occasions, look into his inmost soul ; not through dread of what he might see therein (his life had been wholly pure), but for fear of what he knew he should not see.

This imperfect contemplation of his inner self afforded neither hope nor satisfaction. He found a certain rugged pleasure in doing his duty (often though it was a most painful one) in that state of life in which it had pleased God to place him. His daily war with evil, and the common and revolting sins

6 *The Scripture Reader of St. Mark's.*

it was his business, as it was his burning desire, to combat, by turns sickened him, sent him into the depths of despondency, or urged him on to more heroic effort, according to his mood, and this was largely governed by his none too stable health.

His loneliness, in the midst of a thousand active cares and occupations, was perfect and supreme. The magnitude of its proportions was hardly realised by the lonely man, himself.

In the squalid streets and alleys of the parish, and in the inhuman homes in which he spent the greater part of his life, care for the needs of others closed the door on dissatisfied unrest. But when he was alone in the small room that he had not yet learnt, for all his rigorous self-discipline, to call, cheerfully, "my home," he could and did occasionally lapse from thought of others to thinking of himself.

These lapses were the fatal and unvarying result of a visit to the respective curates'

homes. These homes were poor in worldly goods ; but one of the curates had a widowed mother, the other a full blown family, so far as brothers and sisters were concerned. Their houses lay in different quarters of the big, straggling parish ; and Rentworth, the one who owned the mother, was, being engaged in marriage to a sister of his comrade, equally at home in both.

Lee had not a single relative in the whole world. He was the posthumous, only child of a small tradesman in the parish ; and his mother, once a housekeeper in the household of the late vicar of St. Mark's, had died in giving birth to him.

The curates were kind to the lonely scripture reader, in an unthinking and spasmodic way. The pressure in St. Mark's was such that to take an enduring interest in any one, even in the most abandoned villain, was hardly possible.

Both Rentworth and his comrade, Hall, desired to marry, and chafed at the inevitable

delay. Sometimes they were inclined to deem themselves the worst used young men in London. They would have smiled, sardonically, if any one had said that Lee, in the innermost recesses of his own stubborn soul, envied them the home life they were so ready to disparage for themselves.

Turning the corner of his street, this Christmas Eve, Lee came into collision with two figures, hurrying, like himself, along the darkening streets, and, like himself, by reason of the storm, scarce masters of themselves.

"Hullo, Lee!" rang out a man's hearty voice. "Off again! Not my way, eh?"

The scripture reader raised his hat in silent recognition of the lady hanging on the speaker's arm, before replying:—

"Not exactly, Mr. Rentworth. I am going to Blink's Alley."

"Well, won't you come round and look us up after?" went on the man's voice, a little urgently. "Do change your mind. It's not a party, you know,—only Hall and Miss

Hall (he pressed the slim arm beneath his own still closer), and her brothers and sisters. Milly, do persuade Mr. Lee."

"O! do change your mind and come, Mr. Lee," said the young lady, with perfunctory politeness.

"Thank you, Miss Hall," replied the scripture reader, dropping, unawares, into the formal manner he invariably assumed, less by habit than by instinct, in the presence of the other sex; "but, after Blink's Alley, I have a visit to make in Frey Court."

"O! hang Frey Court!" began the other man, impetuously. "It's Christmas Eve! You must have a little relaxation."

"After Frey Court," went on the unmoved scripture reader, "I have two families in Matilda Lane to look to."

"We are keeping you," broke in the young lady, sweetly. "It is very inconsiderate of us when you have so much to do. Good-night, Mr. Lee, and a merry Christmas to you!"

She swept her companion off. Before they started on their different ways the men exchanged the usual Christmas wishes. The scripture reader's were tinged with a slight impatience, due, chiefly, to an unreasonable envy of the more fortunate curate; those of the latter glowed with warmth and heartiness. In the face of the scripture reader's zeal the curate felt remorseful when he thought of the festive scene in which he was to take a part.

Lee turned into a dismal alley, and the wind that stung his face when he wheeled northwards, was charged with soot and smuts.

This scripture reader's was no heroic figure. He was about the middle height, a narrow-chested man, round shouldered; and his action when he walked, effective though it was in point of speed, was painfully inelegant. In manner he was calm and unaffected, and he had none of the hearty ease or geniality that distinguished Rentworth, and made him far more beloved among the

parishioners of St. Mark's than was the scripture reader who gave to them a thousand times more care and love.

Lee had a pale, oval face, and a mobile mouth, that he had trained to steadiness. His hair and slight moustache were insignificantly coloured. His eyes had an odd, eager light in them, and were strangely dark and full of feeling. They seemed to hint at depths all unexplored within that mild and somewhat worn exterior. Lee's was a remarkably quick temper, and not infrequently he lost it. The agonies of remorse he suffered, after each outburst, were as sincere as they were pathetically unproportionate to the offence.

Coming out of Matilda Lane, his day's work ended, his foot slipped on a bit of orange peel lying on the pavement. He staggered sideways; and to save himself from falling headlong into the narrow, stone-paved roadway on his left, lurched, with impetuous weight, against the wall

that bounded the right side of the lane. He fell against some object that was crouching, unperceived by him, against the wall; and both he and the other unknown thing came heavily to the ground. There was a faint, hoarse scream, and a sharp crash, as of a small glass or china thing smashing upon the pavement; and there came, to add to the confusion in his brain, the overpowering smell of some strong drug. Lee rose to his knees, for the moment dazed, with a bruised forehead and a smarting eye.

The object involved with him in his fall he soon saw to be a woman, who was still lying—a huddled heap—upon the ground. He bent over her, and again the pungent smell attacked his nostrils. Of a sudden, intelligence responded to the sense, and there burst in on him, as a flash across his brain, the staggering truth.

He shook the woman, fiercely, and then tried to raise her head, where she lay, face downwards, on the pavement.

"O, you wicked woman!" he cried, in a low voice, through which excitement thrilled audibly. "You were going to poison yourself!"

There was no reply from the apparently inanimate woman at his feet. Her face was muffled in a long, grey comforter, and, by some mysterious craft, she managed to keep it so concealed, in spite of his best efforts to withdraw it from its wrappings. Lee's strength proved unequal to the struggle; and he raised his head, at last, and helplessly looked round. Night, and the gloomy entrance of Matilda Lane completely shut them in. A few hurried footfalls beat out, dully, in the street beyond, but all passed by.

Once more he turned his hopeless gaze upon the woman, and this time caught the glint of a return stare from an uncovered eye. A hot, sudden anger seized him.

"If you don't get up this instant," he whispered, threateningly, "I'll call for the

policeman round the corner. Now, get up! I mean what I say—I will!”

A hand was thrust out of the grey comforter. It fumbled slowly, but effectively, with its interminable rolls. There came to light a thin, black jacket, and a skirt of a lighter colour, a full, bare throat, and the pale surface of a woman's face. More than this, in the semi-darkness, the scripture reader could not see.

“Well!” said Lee, at last, coldly.

For response the prostrate creature sniffed. It might have been a sniff of contrition, or of despair; again, it might have been defiance.

“Will you get up?” burst out the scripture reader, with a return of his former irritation, “or am I to call that policeman?”

“Bloomin' easy to git up, ain't it, when a cove's a-kneelin' on your petticoats!” returned the lady, half sullenly, and half derisively.

The scripture reader rose, alertly, to his

feet, and gave a helping hand to her who was, as yet, only a figure and a voice. That voice was hateful with its sullen crust of cockneyism; and yet there was a music in it that set every nerve in Lee's body tingling. It was hoarse, and a certain ringing note in it told a tale, perhaps of tragedy, for sure of desperation. Lee helped its owner to her feet, and she stumbled forwards, and, brushing past him, leaned, heavily, against the wall.

"Now, why couldn't you have got up at once, like a sensible woman, instead of lying in the mud?" exclaimed Lee, severely.

Possibly the woman did not consider this question needed a reply. At any rate she made none.

A sharp fear chilled the blood in the scripture reader's veins.

"Have you—had you taken any of that stuff?" he stammered. He shook her again, in his sudden panic, and she wriggled with a kind of forced impatience. Her action

was futile in its effort to detach his grasp; but reassuring as a mute reply. Lee drew a sigh, expressive of relief.

"If you had taken any I'd have marched you straight up to the police station, and you'd be in court to-morrow," he said, in stern unpity, less that his dread was proved unnecessary, than that she had made him fear.

She turned upon him, fiercely.

"I don't keer!" she whispered, hoarsely. "I'm going to Hell anyway, if you've put a spoke in my wheel this time. Take me to the station if you like! *I don't keer.*"

"I said I was going to take you to the station," replied Lee, steeling his heart to the anguish so inadequately concealed by the brazen defiance of her tones. "I shall not now."

There was a blank silence. A cold sweat, arising from dismay and doubt, broke out upon his forehead.

"Well, we can't stay here all night," he

said, at last, dryly. "Will you come along with me?"

"Weer to? Your rooms?" replied the woman, smartly. "No, thank you, young man, not this evenin'. I have a reputation, if you 'ain't."

"I was going to say to a friend's house—a home I know—the ladies are very kind," stammered the scripture reader, shocked at her flippancy, and inwardly raging at himself for his discomposing lack of self-possession. "Unless," he added, tentatively, vainly peering forward to read the woman's intention from her shadowed face. "Unless you promise to go home at once, or let me accompany you home."

"Well . . . I'll do that!" she replied, in a sudden burst of acquiescence. "I'll go 'ome; but you needn't bother to accompany me."

Her voice broke. It was a very young voice. Lee knew the despairing outcast's tone by heart; but till now he had never

heard it in conjunction with a note so youthful, so absolutely childish.

"I think," he said, with the first gentleness he had shown and felt since the encounter had begun, "you had better come with me to that—that home, for to-night, at least. We can see about going to your home to-morrow," he added, with a brisk cheerfulness, meant to mislead. "Come along!"

She turned her face away, savagely repulsing his outstretched hand. Lee bit his lips, and again his wrathful zeal and an irritating sense of impotence bore down his kinder feelings.

"Look here!" he said, fiercely, in her ear, "I'll have no more of your damned tricks or tantrums! You've just got to come home with me."

She wheeled round, facing him in some excitement; but of what kind, whether amazed or fearful, he could not see. "Well! by Gawd!" she gasped. "Why, you talk

like a man after all, and I reckoned you was nothink but a prayin', preachin' cove, at fust, I did!"

The colour lay on the young man's face in two crimson streaks. The absurd, inconsequent reflection had just flashed over him that he had only that day rebuked, with a glowing burst of rage, the very word on a navvy's lips which, from his own, had apparently aroused this woman's unaffected admiration. In the face of this sudden revelation of his shame it was not in him to rebuke her irreverent exclamation.

"But I won't go with you to your 'omes," went on the woman, lapsing into a wail which she appeared to care no longer to conceal.

Lee allowed no gentleness to mitigate his zealous turbulence on her behalf. A rigid sense of duty, more than pity, sealed his firm resolve to hinder her from putting into force her worst intentions (whatever they might be). His distaste for the task, so suddenly

thrust on him, was only equalled by the fiery rage that seized him when he realised his utter impotence. Her listless, but alarming obstinacy frightened him; and his air of truculence was only partially assumed.

"Look here, my woman," he said, speaking very slowly and distinctly. "I say you are going home with me. And when I say a thing like that, I mean it. Do you understand?"

She shrugged her shoulders, drearily, hopelessly.

"So, we'll suit the action to the word." He drew her arm under one of his, preparing to hold the other in readiness lest she should show fight. He found her quite resistless, and the change tempered his cold anger. "Now we'll go home," he said, his voice perceptibly softening. "You can walk, can't you?"

Her sole reply was to step out, spasmodically. He was beginning, dismally, to congratulate himself on his success, when she

checked her faltering steps, and, without warning, jerked her arm from his.

The next second she had fallen to her knees upon the pavement, thrown her arms around his feet, and laid her head upon them.

Many broken hearts had been laid bare before the scripture reader's. Heavy were the burdens, and full of sin and shame the secrets that were brought to him, to deprecate, to lighten, or to share.

In his own narrow, unenlightened way, he had been high priest, father confessor, and consoler to more than a few who dwelt in tribulation, under the shadow of St. Mark's. But never yet had he had cognisance of such heartrending anguish as was revealed to him in this appealing action, these shuddering sobs, this sudden abandonment of all reserve. His soul was in a turmoil, and he could render her but little help, at first, in trying to restore to her some sort of self-control.

He bent low to catch the words that many choking sobs alighted on, caught up, and turned into a long-drawn outburst of hysteria.

"Don't take me to the 'ome—not weer the lydies speak kind an' lovin'—O!—O!—don't!"

A renewal of her distressing sobbing tore her frame afresh.

"O! not to an 'ome," she began again. "For Gawd's sake! For pity's sake—for your own sweet'heart's sake—don't—don't!"

A revulsion of feeling sent Lee's brain whirling round. He raised her to her feet, and held her up until the second outburst was subdued.

"Well, look here," he said, at last, clearing his throat, and in not wholly reassuring accents; "you must go somewhere, so you must come home with me, to my home. You can't go on like this all night! Don't begin to cry again! I won't take you to that other home, since you're so set against it;

though it's the best—the *right* thing to do,” —his voice was savage now—“O! come along!”

Her hands tightened on his arm in meek concurrence. They turned out of the lane, and the wind blew a snowflake—the first out of many—into Lee's up-lifted face.

The woman stumbled along by his side. Her head drooped.

“Are you tired?” asked Lee, at last, in somewhat gentler tones. “Perhaps I hurt you when I fell against you.” A feeling of remorse seized him, but he steadfastly crushed it. “But that was not my fault, you know,” he resumed aloud, severely. “You had no business to be there.”

They went on, struggling against the wind and the blinding snow that thickened every instant.

“We shall not be long before we get there,” said he, at last, heroically making of his mouth a snow trap, in his desire to reassure his faltering companion.

The Scripture Reader of St. Mark's.

There was no reply. Lee felt nettled.

"Are you tired? Can you keep up?"

Still she kept silence.

"Are you tired, I asked?"

His only answer was the shrill whistle of the wind, and the dull, intermittent roar of the traffic that was fast diminishing. Lee walked on in stony silence.

When the scripture reader arrived at his door, he drew out his latchkey and thrust it into the keyhole. His manner was that of an angry man. He half led, half pulled the woman into the small, dark passage, and slammed the door behind him. He was possessed with a strong, unchristian desire to shake this woman, who had made herself so wantonly a burden. With cheeks inflamed by anger, he stumbled backwards up the narrow staircase, supporting her as best he could, she humbly following. Even had she been an infant he could not have handled her more gently. But his gentleness was strictly limited to action. His

whole heart would have gone out to a man in the same piteous strait. She was a woman, most hysterical, and also most unreasonable; and he had unconsciously divided his emotions between cold sympathy for her, and a savage pity for himself.

At the top of the two short flights, he went on in advance, and fumbled for the door handle. She pulled up, suddenly.

"Who lives 'ere? Are there other folks?" Then, passionately, "I won't go in and let other folks see!"

"There are no other people to see. This is my room," said Lee, coldly. He opened the door while speaking, and disclosed a small, square room, dimly lighted on one side by the embers of a dying fire. She followed, turning her head from side to side, as might a hunted creature, scanning the interior of a cave. Her breath came in quick, loud gasps.

"I live here alone," he said; "you had better sit down. Here—here's a chair."

He thrust her into his one chair, with a cold, but not unkind alacrity, and turned to open a cupboard. Out of it he brought a lamp, then felt his way to the mantel-piece for matches.

Not one single thought about the woman's personality, or one single speculation as to what her face was like, had yet assailed him. He struck a light, not from curiosity to see the real woman, who had taken possession of his evening; but merely to get to business, and have done with the inevitable scene.

As the match spluttered, flared, sank, and then flared up again, the woman shifted, uneasily, on her chair. Lee's back was to her. He calmly began to light the lamp.

"You needn't be afraid," he remarked, in indifferent reply to the agitated rustling he could hear behind him. "There is no one in this house except myself and my landlady. And she," he added, dryly, after

a pause, "is deaf, half blind, and afflicted with asthma. We shall not see her."

The rustling stopped. He could hear the ebb and flow of her quick, spasmodic breath. The lamp wick took much coaxing before responding to the match flame, and for some seconds occupied his mind.

Finally the lamp was lighted, and he turned, drawing himself aside, mechanically, so that it should cast its fullest light on her. The next moment he had stepped back, and his cheeks were crimsoned. Her face had wrought this marvellous effect!

The woman faced him, her eyes feverishly questioning, her mouth trembling, her cheeks white. He continued to gaze at her, in awe, horror, and dismay—a concentration of emotions on which self-possession had, for the moment, completely foundered.

This was not caused solely by her beauty, although her looks were of a kind that rarely came under his consideration, and were wondrous in their virgin loveliness.

But in every curve and round her quivering lips lurked youthfulness. Her forehead was as pure and open as an infant's. Her eyes were like an angel's, and contained eternal mysteries; but her mouth was all a woman's, and pleaded piteously for mercy. Her throat and her rounded up-curved chin were full and white; and her figure was so slight that she might have been a boy, masquerading in woman's dress, but for the tawny, golden hair that fell in masses on her shoulders. She was neatly dressed, but her beautifully formed hands were rough with work and discoloured with the cold.

"Why, you—you are only a young girl!" stammered the scripture reader.

He bit his lip, the next moment, inwardly condemning the exclamation that told of his perturbed amazement. Youth and virgin innocence looked wanly back at him from the girl's sad face, and from her boyish, little figure.

And she—this girl-child—had been reduced

to the last desperate straits of a betrayed woman! He gazed at her with awe, and timidly approached. He had experience in dealing with vice; but this innocent-faced, desperate girl made him distrust himself and his powers for consolation. Awkwardly self-conscious of his limitations, he could think of nothing more heroic or apposite to say than——

“I thought you were an——a woman.”

Another word had been on his lips. He paused, just in time to avoid uttering the fatal expression. Still she said nothing, but continued to look at him. One moment her changeful face displayed bravado, the next, but childish penitence. Beneath its defiance and repentance, her countenance bore vivid traces of some recent terror. Lee had been struck dumb by her youth, her beauty, and apparent innocence. But her silence angered him. He came a step closer.

“You had no right to do as you did,” he

began, in characteristic wrath. "Do you know you were doing a most wicked thing? Your life is not your own, to fling away like that."

"I guess it is," she replied. The coldest heart would have bled to hear the hopeless sadness of her tones. "It belongs to no one else."

"You are wrong," said Lee, formally, making a second vigorous effort to shut out of his heart the wave of pity that was beating at its doors.

"No! I'm right. *He* doesn't want me, and there's no one else."

"Who's he?"

"My—my—my sweetheart."

"Then there is—was—a man?" The scripture reader's eyes kindled; his voice lost itself in the vague, stammering question.

She rose from her chair, her hands outstretched, her eyes ablaze.

"A man? Yes! But don't you speak to me of him!" she burst out, hoarsely. "It's

me to tell you! I loved him, and I don't kee who knows, and he said he loved me and—and chucked me up, frightenin' me orful, and I loved him still, I did, and 'cause he wouldn't keep on with me, and I was frightened to death, I bought that stuff—what you knocked out of my 'and and spilt, afore I had begun to try and do it."

With blazing eyes she faced the lamp and Lee. Her childish bosom heaved, but the stormy voice broke out afresh, and her lips hardened.

"An' you thought I was one o' them pore lost souls—unfortinits you call 'em—did you?" she went on, thickly. "Thank you for that." She began to laugh, hysterically, and favoured Lee with a mocking curtsy. "Why, you baby in trousers! I tell you I'm as honest as you!"

The scripture reader stepped stiffly forward; but his hand was raised, beseechingly, and his eyes were full of a stormy self-reproach.

"Be quiet!" he said, hotly. "I do not want to hear any more. I tell you I did not think you were—were—not innocent as soon as I saw you."

She continued her speech, unheeding his pained protest.

"Can't a gal try and kill 'erself through bein' scared and desp'rit, without bein' that? Why, if I'd bin what you'd thought, I'd hev gone on the streets, and got meat and drink and pretty clothes and a fat livin'."

Lee shuddered.

"Will you listen to me?" he cried. "You shall listen! I did make the mistake, but that makes no difference—can't you see?" He raised his voice when her inarticulate explanation burst out again, with more intensity. "I was going to save you from suicide for your own sake, and because it is forbidden by God, and not because of what you were or were not!"

There was a deathly silence as his voice and hers broke off, together.

Lee's face was white, and her head drooped.

And then, without another word, without a moan or cry, the girl fell forward in a fit.

He caught her in his arms, and staggered backwards under the double burden of the shock and her. Then he lowered her gently to the ground, and feverishly set about restoring her to consciousness.

He had plenty of deft handiness, resource, and experience, and his treatment soon revived her. While he was waiting for consciousness to fully reassert itself, he knelt and placed one hand upon her wrist. It was wondrously small and dainty to the touch, despite the dirt that had accumulated on it. Her face looked strangely pure and beautiful, and pathetically young. Lee gazed on her with an austere frown.

At last her sad eyes opened.

"I am so tired," she whispered, with an apologetic little smile; "so tired!"

"Are you?" returned Lee, in a dejected voice.

"Don't send me to the 'ouse," she pleaded.
"Don't do that!"

"Very well," said the scripture reader, gloomily.

"Or the station!"

"No; I won't do that."

"Nor to that 'ome you spoke of, with kind lydies and tractses,"—she shivered. "You won't send me there?"

Her voice, when cleared of its hoarse fury and of its desperate ring, was full of soft and subtle melody. The joylessness that lurked in every note of it, made, even of the aching twang, a music that thrilled Lee's heart.

She put out a hand, appealingly.

"You won't send me there?" she insisted, softly, coaxingly.

"I can't promise that," replied the scripture reader, stiffly, drawing away his hand as her fingers touched his; "you must go somewhere!"

She raised her head in a bewildered way, and sat up, staring blankly around.

"Can't I stay 'ere?" she gasped. Dismay was in her voice, and tears—but not of hysteria—were in her eyes. "Can't I stay 'ere for to-night?"

"O! I daresay you can for to-night," said Lee, with no little irritation. "But I am thinking of to-morrow."

"I won't go 'ome to my old 'ome, never—never!"

"Why not?"

"They're drunken beasts—dad and mother are!" she explained, vehemently; "and it's awful livin' with 'em. *He* promised to take me away from 'em, but never—never did." She broke off, suddenly.

Lee's mouth twitched.

"She'll send me on the streets," the girl went on, a fitful agitation ever and anon returning, in spite of her great weariness. "She's tried to ever since I was twelve years old. If you drives me to go to my 'ome,

she'll drive me on the streets. You—you wouldn't like that for me, would you?"

"I should not like that for—any woman," replied Lee, avoiding the imploring glances of her trustful, childish eyes.

"Then you won't send me 'ome?"

"N—no."

"And I'll never go to that other 'ome, with lydies and tractses!" she burst out, passionately.

"You talk like a foolish child."

"I don't keer!" Tears sprang from her eyes, and her bosom heaved. "I'd die sooner!"

"Don't be silly!"

"I will! If you makes me go I'll kill myself—there's a thousand ways—I will! But fust I'll scream and kick, and you'll hev to call the coppers in to get me there, and I guess it'll take six of 'em to! And then I'll kill myself, or try to kill some one else fust!"

Her babyish face became transfigured, as

if by some astounding touch of magic, into the image of invincible Defiance.

"You are really too idiotic!" cried Lee, trying hard, but not altogether successfully, to keep his temper under control. "You are a baby!"

"I'm a woman!" she retorted, springing to her feet. "And if you takes me to any of your preachin' 'omes I'll kill myself."

"I do not believe your threat," was Lee's unfortunate reply. "I believe you had been trying to take that stuff a long time before I came, and couldn't."

An odd look leaped to her eyes. Lee, apparently unmoved, returned her startled gaze.

"You know a good deal," she said, at last. "I guess you've dealt with silly gals afore."

The scripture reader frowned, involuntarily, so significant, yet so free from resentment, was her voice, and so beseeching and so sad her smile.

"It is hard for a gal to kill 'erself," she went on, drearily, "even when she's made desprit. . . . But there's one thing she can always do."

Lee watched her closely, her tender, drooping head, her boyish, little figure, her hands hanging listlessly by her sides, her lips resolute with a defiance less childish than mysteriously fatalistic.

"I can do that," she whispered, peering up at Lee through her long, wet eyelashes. "And that I'll do!" She laughed, but her laughter was no more hysterical than had been her tears. "It begins with drink, don't it, and then the streets follows? I'll begin to-morrow—the bars and the streets!"

Her futile and absurd threat of suicide had left Lee unmoved. This other chilled him to his bones. He was not quick at reading character, and was wont to weigh actions less by the relative motive of the doer than by their positive result. This time he saw the girl would do exactly as she said, having no

bias either one way or the other. Her all but certain fate he knew too well. He shuddered, inwardly, but outwardly he seemed a man of ice.

"Why do you talk like that?" he said, at last, forcing himself to say something, in the teeth of her inquiring glances.

"To show you what sort of gal I am."

"Then I think you are a very wicked girl!" he cried, hotly. He saw her smile, and was maddened at the sight.

There was a silence.

"Do you know," he went on, wearily, "I am rather tired of this. It is nearly midnight. You cannot, of course, go anywhere to-night. You must sleep here; there's no other place in this house."

"You said the 'ouse was empty," she replied, quickly, "'cept the landlady. Does she take up the 'ole rest of the 'ouse?"

Her mocking accents were like fuel to the fires of the helpless irritation that had long beset him.

"So it is!" he said, more angrily than he had yet spoken, "quite empty. I am the only lodger. There are three other rooms; and there is not a shred of furniture or carpet in one. Would you like to sleep on bare boards?"

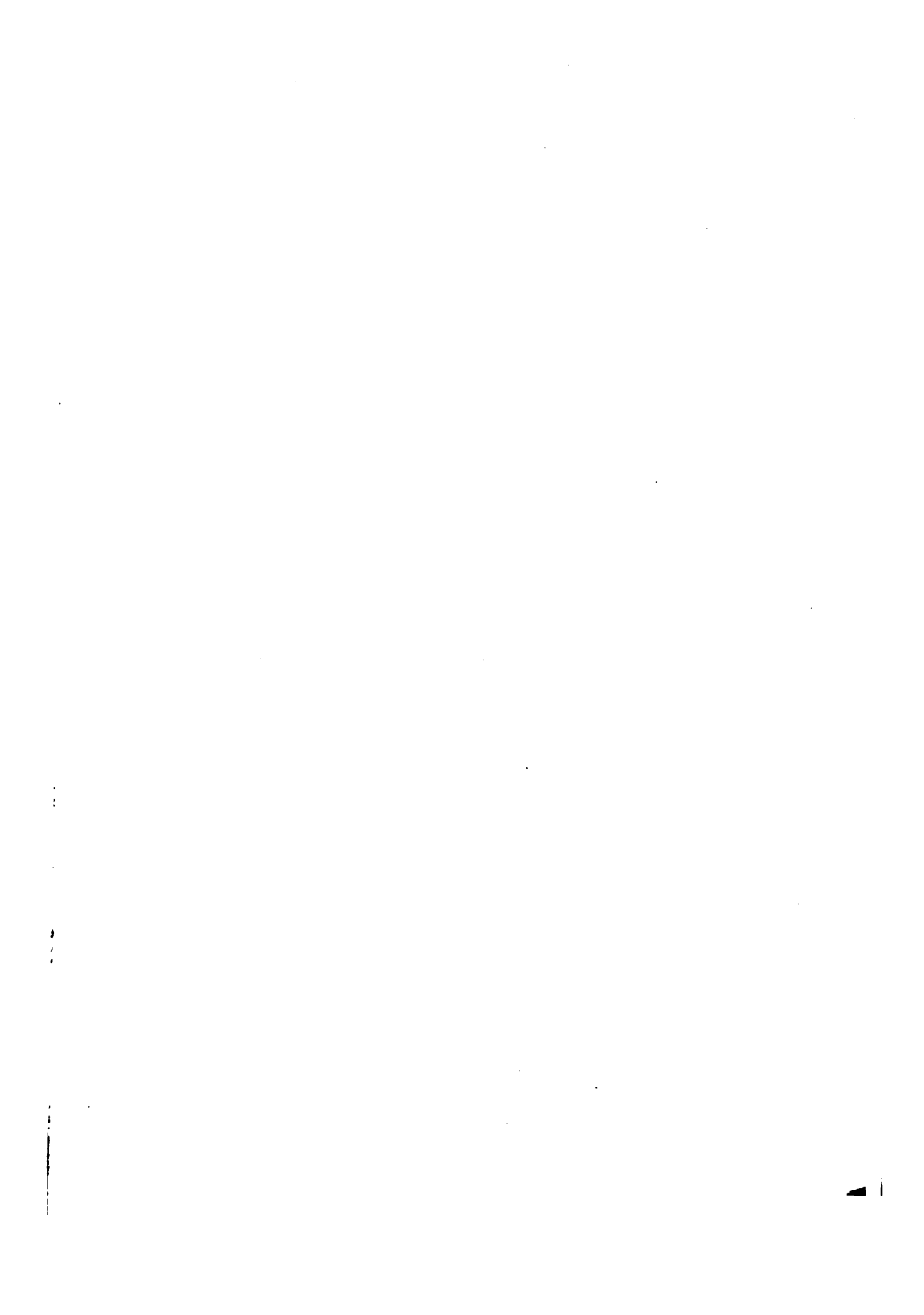
She sighed, pettishly. She had sunk to the edge of Lee's small, low bedstead, and was swinging her feet to and fro, after the manner of a thwarted child.

"What will you do?"

"O, pray do not think of me!" retorted Lee, with clumsy sarcasm.

When he saw her white cheeks flush, and that she bit her lips, remorse attacked him. It had the effect of adding to his stony gloom.

"I'll call the landlady, her name's Gibbets, and leave you now," he said, with a slight start, after a minute's silence. "Perhaps you'll want something. Remember she is deaf when you speak to her. Your shoes are wet, too; you must take them off. Good-night!"





THEN HE KNELT BY THE BEDSIDE AND PROCEEDED, DELIBERATELY, TO REMOVE HER WET SHOES.

See page 41.

She sank back, wearily, on the bed; neither responding to his "good-night," nor paying the slightest heed to his suggestion. Lee paused by the door, and then stepped back.

"Your shoes are wet through."

"I—don't—keer."

He shrugged his shoulders, as if in mute, dreary acceptance of the fate that had put upon him so unreasonable a charge. Then he knelt by the bedside and proceeded, deliberately, to remove her wet shoes. Her stockings were drawn off in the same stolid way, and Lee held her tiny, ice-cold feet; for one second, in his hands.

When he arose there was a new light in his sombre eyes, and his pulse was beating fast.

"Now get to bed," he said, over his shoulder, when he had again reached the door. "I'll send the woman up with a warm blanket. Do be sensible and get to bed."

She appeared incapable of both achievements. It seemed against all sense and

reason that she should leap to her naked feet, and run to him with outstretched hands, and it was in direct defiance of his last appeal. Yet that is what she did.

"Don't—don't be angry with me!" she pleaded; the tears were streaming down her cheeks, and her hair was tossed around her in lovely, infantile disorder. "I didn't, O! I didn't mean for to do all this."

"Well, never mind," said Lee, gently, his back against the door, one hand behind him on the handle, the other in his pocket. "Go back to bed now."

"I didn't mean to be this bother," she sobbed; "and take your bed, and you havin' to sleep, p'raps, on boards."

"Never mind," said he again, with a wan smile. This phase of her distress cut him more deeply than he cared to show. "I'll be all right. Now do go back to bed."

She went slowly back, her head drooping, the picture of weariness and sorrow. Lee went out and closed the door softly behind him.

CHAPTER II.

BETWEEN THE EVENING AND THE DAY.

CHRISTMAS Day had scarce put off the shroud of night, when the scripture reader started from a troubled dream and found himself awake. He had intended to pass the night in one of the empty rooms upstairs; but, long before the bells from neighbouring churches had rung in the advent of the Feast Day, he had crept downstairs, his shoes in one hand, a small rug on his arm, and taken up a recumbent position on the dark landing, outside his room. He had said to himself that "she" might be taken ill, and might need help. The landlady would never hear, and she might call out and cry in vain throughout

the long, dark hours, if no one were at hand!

Lee's Other Self sternly bade him bear in mind he was a reasonable man, and was reputed sane. "No one but a lunatic," went on the second chiding voice, "would lie on the landing all night, lest ill should happen to a girl in a warm room and comfortable bed, and find her incapable to help herself." The scripture reader winced.

"I think it very likely a girl like that would take it into her head to do something foolish," said that First Self. "To go down would be the act not of a lunatic, but of a wise man."

"I think it very likely you will do something rash, if you do go down," said a Third Voice, within, that was neither rebuking nor insensate, but only fatalistic.

The scripture reader flushed, painfully, in the lonely darkness of the attic. In a kind of icy self-contempt he went noiselessly and doggedly downstairs, and rolled himself in

his rug, outside the door. Sleep came at last, but it was painfully delayed.

During the interval between his stretching himself along the landing, and the falling headlong into troublous dreams, he set himself to pass, in resolute review, his busy, active life, its multifarious duties and rewards. More than a few times thought strayed, abstractedly, to contemplation of the face of her who slept—he hoped—within; and he found himself holding his hands as though in them were something small and soft that he was trying to warm. After these lapses, on coming to himself, he shook himself, vigorously. At last he slept.

It was still dark when he awoke, and his first thought was a troubled one. He remembered, with a dull pang of self-reproach, that on lying down to rest the night before, he had not said his prayers. He stumbled to his knees, and leaned his head, wearily, against the door. It creaked, and he wondered if she slept, the other side.

All the time he was repeating his prayers,—and he prayed half perfunctorily, with little of his wonted fervour,—he was wondering whether she still slept. When he had finished praying, he rose, stiffly; his knees and his head ached. He turned the handle, softly, and stood within the doorway. After a moment of irresolution, and with no motive beyond an overwhelming impulse, he went in.

From the dark corner in which stood the bed, he could hear the sound of breathing, regular and soft. She slept.

Still yielding to that impulse, the scripture reader noiselessly stepped forward, until he was near enough to touch the hanging bed-clothes. So violent were the beatings of his heart that he seemed to hear them mingling, discordantly, with her soft breath. His own came thick and fast. His head was burning hot, but his hands were cold as ice.

He dropped gently to one knee; and gradually the darkness seemed to fall away, like mist dissolving, from the fair face on the

pillow. In that pale light she looked like an angel-child. She stirred slightly in her sleep, and murmured a name — "Charlie". At once she was a woman in the eyes of him who was looking down on her. Lee flushed. He had had much experience of midnight watching by the side of sick beds ; but never before had he seen a pure, young girl asleep in the first full glow of health and youth.

"I'll go back to bed—she's all right," he said to himself, at last.

But he did not go. He stayed there, kneeling by the bed, and long and steadfastly looked at the sleeping girl. Such thoughts as chased each other through his troubled brain may not be lightly told.

Presently it came upon him, with a start of dreary wonder, that never before had he experienced the strange emotion that had taken hold of him, and seemed to drive out from his brain all coherent casting of the future. It was as though he dreamed a dream, and seemed to be aware of it. One

thought, above all others, recurred, and would obtrude itself in the midst of his confused reflections, and in it was embodied the utter loneliness of his life.

At last he arose, his limbs cramped, his face burning. He went on tiptoe to the door, passed through and closed it after him, with the careful and deliberate softness that was a part of all his movements.

Darkness had not yet given place to light, although day long before had ousted night, when Lee once more made his way upstairs; and, entering the attic above his room, drew his rug round him, and stretched himself upon the boards.

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS DAY.

LEE passed for a practical, unimaginative man, with plenty of sound sense, a useful lack of the romantic element, a full appreciation of man's duty, and a most unflinching allegiance to his own. His first act on the day that followed his adventure in Matilda Lane, was to send up the landlady, Mrs. Gibbets, to attend to the requirements of his visitor.

The much-afflicted woman of the house had reached an age when nothing can astonish, and everything is a burden to the flesh. She protested, at the outset, but yielded to the force of Lee's insistence and strangely flashing eyes ; and came downstairs again with the intelligence that "that there young gal is already hup, sir, and

askin' for you,"—which message she delivered with no more curiosity or sense of outraged propriety, and with far less animation or emotion, than if she had been discussing the details of the weekly house-keeping.

Lee ran blithely up the creaky stairs, and his landlady stared up after him ; until an attack of coughing sent her staggering to the kitchen. But the scripture reader's suddenly acquired vivacity, for some reason unexplained, dropped from him on the threshold, and he entered the room with a sober, almost stolid air.

Again he started at the sight of her, and again his start was uncontrollable. She was, as the landlady had said, already up and dressed. Her jacket and her cap were rolled up on the sideboard, and her blouse and skirt revealed her pretty slenderness of figure. Her hair was neatly braided, her complexion fresh and blooming ; all traces of last night's emotions had vanished from her face.

Her eyes sparkled under her long curved lashes ; though the way she drooped her head in deprecation was absurdly babyish. She had all the self-possession of a woman. And she had, moreover, the air of being entirely at home. Child as she looked, Lee was, at once, possessed with the foreboding that, in the burning matter of the adjustment of affairs, she would be more than a match for him. An irritating sense of impotency burned secretly through all his veins. He faced her, with a steady look and cold demeanour.

She advanced, meekly.

"I was goin' to say I didn't want to keep you outer your room any longer," she began, softly. "I hev' some coppers"—she rattled her pocket, with guileless ostentation ; but her voice was as quiet and subdued as the ebbing tide at low water. "I dessay I can buy summat from the old woman downstairs, and eat my breakfast in one o' them empty rooms. I can't bear to think o' keepin' you outer your room."

The childish eyes were raised, at last; and Lee saw in each something that looked like a tear.

"I was going to propose that we have breakfast now," said the scripture reader, gravely; concealing, admirably, the absurd excitement into which her voice had thrown him. "After breakfast we can talk. We have business to settle," he added, with marked emphasis on the last word.

She kept silence. A little later they were seated, face to face, at Lee's tiny table; a plain but plentiful breakfast between them.

Lee, according to his habit, had helped to bring the food up from the kitchen; and he set a dish of sausages opposite to the borrowed chair with a good deal of unnecessary clatter. He possessed but one chair of his own, and she was leaning, negligently, over it, with lazy amusement at his movements in her eyes. The landlady came in with a coffee pot and milk jug.

Besides the afflictions, already mentioned,

of this old lady, there was one other that was less chronic than periodic. This was a lugubrious habit of improving the occasion by reflections that were not always opportune. And one of these was prompted by the coffee and the milk she was placing on the table.

"To think I've sunk to this," she muttered, with a wail. "Waitin' on folkses meat and drink! You, sir," — turning, drearily, to Lee, who was awaiting her departure with visible impatience, — "you, sir, never required no waitin' on, and sech was the terms. I 'ope, bein' a pore widder, 'twill be remembered in the weekly payin'." She made a movement to the door. "More 'specially as this 'ere will be a permanent arrangement, won't it, sir?"

In the ghastly silence that ensued, an audible titter came from behind the chair over which the girl was leaning. Lee closed the door upon his landlady, the picture of stony unconsciousness; but a baleful light was in his lowered eyes. His

voice was preternaturally toneless in the words—

“Breakfast is ready”.

She raised her head. Her eyes met his, unabashed, but her pretty face was flushed.

“Shall I”—her voice caught on another titter—“shall I pour out the coffee?” she asked, hurriedly.

“O, certainly,” replied Lee, coldly.

She performed her functions with grace and ease, and with a self-possession that made him wonder. He watched her, furtively, while he ate his sausage, and frowned, at himself, each time he caught her sparkling eyes.

“You have not told me what your name is,” he said, at last.

“You ain’t asked me,” she retorted, flip-pantly.

“Well!” his brows again contracted in his new impatience, “what is it?”

“Al—lex—an—der—rar.”

“O!”

"What's yourn?"

"Mine is Lee," said the scripture reader, stiffly.

"H'm."

There was a short pause, then—

"What's your lay?" Alexandra asked, with a delightfully comic air of making conversation.

"I am the scripture reader of St. Mark's."

"I guessed you were somethink of that," she replied, with a little flash of triumph; "I guessed you were in that line by the way you carried on last night."

"I am not aware," said he, with rising colour, that was chiefly due to anger, and with impressive emphasis, "that *I* carried on at all last night."

"Why, all that tommy-rot about bein' wicked, and doin' what Gawd 'll want you to do, when you wants to do somethink diffrent," she said, with alacrity and splendid vagueness. "No one but a gospel cove 'ud talk rot like that."

"I am sorry you think the plain, natural duty of man to his Creator 'rot,'" said Lee, with growing sternness ; "I do not like your expressions at all. I cannot think they are sincere."

"Bet you they are! Lord! I don't pay no stock to doin' what's right when I wants to do what's wrong, I can tell you."

"I cannot believe you now!" cried Lee, who was visibly shocked and agitated, and staring wildly at her.

Her puzzled look soon brought him to himself, but his gloom deepened. Alexandra faintly smiled.

"I'm not your sort, am I?" she said, with a little, sad shrug of her shoulders. "You seem to keer about what's right or wrong. Now I think it's better to be well off and 'appy while you can, even if it means bein' wicked, and then make the best of a bad job."

"I do not see how your remarks apply to the present situation," said Lee, drily. "The

question was whether, without provocation, it was right or wrong for you to try to take your life, merely because you were tired of it, or frightened."

She winced, and changed colour. It was the first time she had hung out signals of discomposure. At the old landlady's querulous assumption of a "permanent arrangement" she had only flushed up with wicked glee and mischief.

"I 'ad provocation," she said, with sullen lips.

Then, seeing that Lee remained incredulously and coldly silent, she changed her mood, and she raised her head and regarded him, with sad eyes.

"Do you know, I did—love 'im," she said, in an undertone. There were tears in her pathetic voice; but the wondrous lustre of her childlike eyes was only softened, not diminished. "And I 'ad lost 'im, and I was quite alone, and O, so frightened, you can't think, 'cause I was quite alone."

Still Lee kept silence. He went on eating, stolidly, but the effort nearly choked him ; still he said nothing.

"Weren't that enough?"—she asked, in timid wonder, and with a kind of coaxing humbleness, as though desirous of disarming his unyielding opposition,—"weren't that enough to make it not very wrong to kill myself, lovin' a man, and bein' nothink to 'im, and 'im not lovin' me any more, and me bein' alone and frightened to death,—weren't that enough?"

"Really," said Lee, softening at last, in spite of his outraged instinct, "you are nothing more or less than a child! And a very foolish child," he added, with a swift return of his severity of tone and mien.

She sighed, and turned again to her plate and bread and butter.

"How old are you, Alexandra?" asked the scripture reader.

She raised her head again and looked at him in genuine amazement. The vibration

of his voice in the utterance of her name had also taken him aback. But he met her look of wonder with a cold defiance that perceptibly excited her.

"I'm seventeen," she said. "But I'm not a child."

Lee, through his downcast lids, felt her eyes upon his face, and there came upon him a vague dread that, if he raised them, she would see right into his inmost soul. The next moment he was asking himself, in a strange, dumb fury, what would it matter if she could? There was nothing there but what both she and the whole world might see.

"If you have done breakfast," he said, steadily, "we might clear away, and then settle what had better be done."

"I've done," she replied.

He glanced at her, his own mood forgotten in the wonder that her quivering voice aroused. When their eyes met, a vivid, painful blush rose up in Alexandra's

cheek, flooding her pretty face, from her white throat up to her open forehead. A terrible excitement seized the man and shook his soul to its foundations.

But she saw nothing of his altered countenance, because he quickly turned away, and began to lay hands, in feverish haste, on what remained of breakfast.

They cleared the meal away in a strange, electric silence. Once they stumbled on each other, in passing round a chair, and Lee shrank back. And once the same dish was seized by both, and their hands came into violent collision. Alexandra's was the one that kept its hold. The scripture reader drew his back with something of the intemperate haste he might have shown if hers had been surcharged with venom.

By reason of his turbulent emotions, that he could not, in spite of all his efforts, put away, Lee forced himself, at last, to some commonplace of utterance. He was folding up the little tablecloth, while she was

dusting, ostentatiously, a crumb from off a chair.

"One sometimes thinks it seems hardly worth while to have all the trouble of regular meals, the getting ready, then the eating, and then the clearing away," he said, with formal ponderousness. "Especially when, as with myself, every minute of the day is precious."

"I don't find gettin' meals and clearin' away horrid, at all," said Alexandra, after a dry silence; "I rather likes it."

"I was not speaking of it as personally pleasing or displeasing; I was referring to it merely as a tax on one," replied Lee, with the same formality of tone, but with renewed annoyance at his own propensity for ill-timed observations.

"I s'pose you are a busy man," said Alexandra, slowly, as if involved in thought. "And that's why you find it a bother. But I don't, you see. I've nothink to do and nowhere to go, since I ran away from home and left the workshop."

"Did you work in a workshop?" asked Lee, snatching, eagerly, at what seemed a ray of brightness in the gloomy situation. "What kind of a workshop?"

"Makin' slop suits at fi'pence per suit—but I've chucked it up, jest remember that!" she said, with equal eagerness on her part. "It was orful 'ard work—orful—all day and sometimes 'arf the night. 'Twas a small shop, and the p'lice didn't pay no attention, as they does to bigger ones. Sometimes when we was sittin' 'arf dead with workin' in the night, the boss 'ud be on the jump for hours expectin' 'em, and knowin' 'e'd be made to pay a orful 'ard price if he was took. We used to wish the coppers would come, but they never did."

"Well, of course you will have to work, but you shan't go back to that workshop," said Lee, in almost the first kind tones she had yet heard from him. They had the depressing effect of reducing her to tears.

Her tears brought on again the throbbing in his heart.

"Let us talk it over," he said, at last, drawing the chairs up to the fire, and sitting down in one, while she sank, listless, in the other. "You must do some work, you know. You are almost a woman."

"Is it a woman's work to sit up, stitch, stitch, stitch, eighteen hours outer twenty-four, one's back breaking and stomach sick and empty, and be bullied and beaten too?"—the scripture reader clenched his hand—"yes, beaten by a big brute of a man," she sobbed. "That's what I and the other gals 'ad, afore I runned away."

"I said you should not go back to that workshop. It is absurd to pretend you did not hear me," said Lee, fiercely. "But not every workshop is like that."

"I'm tired—tired o' slavin'," she sobbed out, wearily. "I've 'ad it ever since I was a tiny kid, and I did think I'd got away from it, at last." She raised her drooping

head, and watched Lee's face through her lashes that were wet with tears. "Don't you ever get tired, workin' and workin', runnin' after wicked folks and preachin' to 'em, night and day?"

Lee shook his head. He could not speak the lie.

"I guess you do—and you're a man! Don't you think a woman gets tired too? or are you one o' them what thinks a woman's made to toil, toil, toil, 'er back achin' till she's fit to drop down dead, and 'ave no end to it, sick or well?"

"Well, I know that if one has no means of living, one must make some," returned Lee, speaking with some difficulty, and rising, abruptly, from his chair, to pace the room. "And only by work can one make money, honestly. Most people have to work, women as well as men. But you needn't—I tell you, I will see to it! Can't you trust me? You need not work more than your strength will bear."

"I don't want to be slavin'," she said, like a spoilt child, peevish and utterly unreasonable. "I am tired of it—tired of it. O! I thought I'd done with work, I did, and you wants me to go back! O! O!"

"I am tired even of my work, sometimes," said Lee, in a low voice, flushing scarlet at the confession. It was the first time he had ever made it, even to himself. "I am tired, sometimes, when I see no good coming from all my efforts, but I work on, and—and trust in God."

"I don't keer about Gawd; that's where I'm diff'rent," she wailed.

"I can't argue with you, now," said Lee. "But I will go out and see what I can find for you in the way of a place; perhaps in some flower-making workshop. That is not hard—that is easy work, and the hours are not so long as are some others. And, if you don't want to go to your home——"

"But I do want to go to my 'ome!"

she broke in, vehemently. She had been listening, with agitation and dismay, to his last speech. "And I won't do no more work, I won't—fifteen hours a day and no pay—I knows it! And I won't bear it no more, I tell you, I won't."

"Listen to me!" said Lee, fiercely, seizing her by her wrists as she rose, with heaving chest and flashing eyes. "You must work."

"I won't."

"Then you will starve, and it will serve you right!"

"No! I won't starve, neither! I'll live on the fat of the land—like a queen! I've got better looks than most gals."

Lee dropped her wrists, but his eyes were fixed on her darkly flushing face. His very lips grew pale.

"Do not threaten me," he said, in a voice that hardly could be recognised, so changed it was.

She was both pleased and frightened at

his sudden change of manner ; but only her elation showed itself. Her eyes gleamed and dimmed, alternately ; they were filled with bewitching lights and shadows.

"I'm not threatenin' you," she said, with a mocking smile. "What am I to you that what I chooses to do matters to you?"

"It matters this to me," said Lee, in the same choked voice, "that I will not, so long as I have breath and can prevent it, let any woman wilfully consign her soul to everlasting misery."

She clasped her hands together, and her head drooped on her bosom. Her flower-like frame dropped forward, too, as with the weight of her own wayward despair.

"Let me go," she muttered, stumbling blindly forward.

Lee caught her in his arms. He felt the beatings of her heart against his breast and her warm, quick breath upon his throat. Love, who had never before in any guise come near him, laid her image in his arms.

He cast down his lonely heart before it, as do the seraphim their crowns before the eternal Throne.

"Let—me—go," again sobbed Alexandra, like a tired, beseeching child.

The scripture reader trembled. This passion, coming unawares, found him defenceless to encounter it.

"Let—let me think," he stammered, huskily, "think what we can do."

"O! you hurt me!" sobbed Alexandra. "Why won't you let me go? You—you don't care! You are cruel."

"I do care." Lee's face was bloodless, his voice was hoarse, and shook, tempestuously. "I care very much, Alexandra; but I am not going to let you go to your ruin."

"But I won't never go to work, grind, grind, grind, all day and night; and, O! I daresn't go 'ome! I'm frightened—frightened to death o' that! They'll kill me for runnin' away!" Her sobs were lowered and

came less frequently, but her voice had the piteous ring of an imprisoned bird. "I tell you I won't go 'ome, or go to work!" She struggled in his arms. "D'you 'ear? I won't—O! you're cruel, like that big man what used to beat us at our work! You'd drive and beat me to work, and it tires me so! O! O! It tires—me—so."

"Don't cry," said Lee; "don't cry so, dear."

"Look at my 'ands," she sobbed. "Do they look like workin' hour arter hour, hour arter hour, while other folks rests? And my back—O! the work makes it ache as you can't ever know!"

Lee slid his trembling hands from her slim shoulders and down the tender muscles of her arms, and clenched them on her delicate, baby wrists. An insensate impulse seized him and swept him off his feet. He swiftly bent his head and kissed her hands. Men and women, too, had kissed his, many times, in ecstasy of gratitude and love; but

Lee had never once before touched a woman with his lips. When he raised his head again a light was in his eyes that none had ever seen before in them.

"Poor little hands!" he said, softly; and he led her to the fire and placed her in a chair. "They do look as if they had worked hard."

"So they 'ave—cruel 'ard!" she said, lapsing into silent weeping.

Lee leaned against the mantelpiece and watched her. No one of those who had known the scripture reader, from his boyhood upwards, all through his busy, patient, uneventful life, would now have recognised in him the man whose features they thought they knew by rote. Love's awakening touch upon his heart had given his face a tenderness that was almost divine. Only the strong, human passions of the man now looked out from his stormy eyes.

"Well, Alexandra, dear," he said, "those

poor little hands of yours shall not work any more."

She put her pretty hands before her face, like a child, shyly. Lee saw a tear or two come trickling through, and the sight of them was more than he could bear, just then. He came to her, and leaned over her.

"What—what do you want?" stammered Alexandra, looking up with great, wet, startled eyes.

"I want——" he spoke with difficulty; his eyes blazed, fiercely, and she shrank before their fires. "Well, I had you in my arms just now," he began again, "and I—I want to hold you again."

She said nothing, only cowered on her chair, and Lee bent lower still. His breath came in quick, sobbing gasps.

"May I, my dear?" he whispered; "may I?"

For answer, her head drooped, but she held out her hands. Lee caught her to

his breast, and rained kisses, in passionate abandonment, upon her yielding, flushing face. At last his lips lingered in one long pressure on her mouth, and the girl returned his kiss. He came to himself again with another deep-drawn sigh.

"Well, well, my God!" he murmured, faintly, gazing into her shining eyes, with wonder in his own. "To think of this, Alexandra! You are going to give yourself to me."

"Y—yes," she seemed to sigh; "if you want me."

His own awe at what had come to pass gave place to a new amazement.

"Great heavens! it is Christmas Day, and I never remembered! There are the bells breaking out again, Alexandra! Do you hear them, darling?"

His sensitive face flushed scarlet when he said the endearing word. But in his eyes there was the light of triumph that an angel might have envied. Alexandra eyed him,

wistfully; then, of a sudden, with a coaxing movement, nestled closer in his arms; and as they closed, a jealous pang—the first—caught hold of his fast-beating heart. It was like a stab to him.

“Do you care to belong to me now?” he said; and he spoke roughly in his dreadful doubt. “Are you going to love me, really and truly—truly, Alexandra?”

“I—do—care,” Alexandra whispered, clinging closer still.

“But that other fellow,” he replied, with sad and savage eyes. “You were going to kill yourself, actually kill yourself through love of him! You said so, Alexandra.” His voice quivered with emotion. “How can you turn to loving me?”

The whole world seemed to stay its course for her reply; the clanging, clamorous bells reminded him, in vain, that he was due to marshal his Sunday-school flock to church.

“Alexandra!” he cried, imploringly.

"How can you think of loving me so soon?"

"'Twasn't only lovin' 'im," she whispered, hanging her head so that he could not see her face; and her shoulders and slight figure shook as if her weeping had begun again. Lee bent his head, striving, with effort, to catch her undertones.

"I did care for 'im," she went on, between her tears. "But when he left me I was un'appy, too, because I was alone. I was all alone, and, O! I was so frightened! I was mad and silly with fright, you can't think, —'twas that."

Lee clasped her closer.

"Alexandra!" he burst out, impetuously; "forget him, won't you? You won't think of him any more, will you? He left you, not caring what happened to you! You will only think of me, and love me, won't you?"

"Y—yes," she faltered.

"Don't let's talk of him or think of him

any more. O, promise me that, dear. Let us put him behind us, out of our thoughts for ever."

"Yes," she said again.

"But your parents?"

She raised a pale, scared face.

"O! don't let 'em know anythink about me and you. If they found me they'd torment me frightful."

"They dare not! You have me to protect you now!"

"You don't know 'em. Don't let 'em know anythink," she pleaded.

"If you really wish it," began Lee, doubtfully.

"I've cut and run from 'em for good. If you knewed the lot they were, you wouldn't ask me to 'ave any more to do with 'em."

"Very well; and you belong to no one else but me. And I can't believe it yet, or think of it! I can only feel it—and I—I do love you so, Alexandra!"

His voice broke. She looked at him with an amazement too great for speech.

"And you only saw me yesterday for the first time," she said, at last, with pondering, wistful glance. "How can you care for me? How do you know you do care?"

"I don't know how I can!" he cried, with vehemence. "I only know I do! And though, till now, I have never for one single moment of my life given a thought to any woman as my wife, or looked at any girl with even a passing thought of tenderness, I know that what I feel for you is Love! and I know that what I now feel for you I shall feel to-morrow, and every other to-morrow, not less but more, and this for ever and for ever and for ever."

She put up her mouth to his, and held his exalted face within the hollows of her hands.

"Well, I'll try to love you too like that," was all she said.

"And I will take you to a friend's house till we are married, darling. We must wait

for the banns, you know ; but it will be only three weeks. I am a very poor man, Alexandra, but you shall never want, God helping me,—*Alexandra !!!*”

The look upon her face, partly startled, partly stony, had brought his ringing utterance to an abrupt conclusion.

“Alexandra,” he repeated, casting troubled glances on her hardening face, “have I—hurt you—said anything that distresses you? You knew I was very poor, didn’t you? frightfully poor, perhaps, but——”

“I knowed you was poor,” she quietly replied, still leaning on his arm, her eyes thoughtfully scanning his agitated face.

“Then what——” he began, eagerly. She stopped him by a gesture.

“And that was what struck me as so queer,” proceeded Alexandra, in a level, measured voice, betraying her agitation only by the way in which she fumbled with a button on her lover’s coat—“your proposin’ *marriage!*”

He staggered back as if he had been struck.

"Then you have betrayed me, and you did not care."

"Ah! but you're wrong!" cried Alexandra, coming a step closer, and speaking in a hurried voice, "I did—I did mean it, and I do mean it, and I will mean it too! Ah! yes, you know I will! I do care. I'll try and love you ev'ry bit as much as you love me, and I'll be true to you, I will. I will—O! I promise I will."

Her hands were far outstretched; her cheeks were radiant with a lovely blush; her eyes alluring, large and bright, and full of pleading passion, of promises, of girlish witchery.

"Why, then, you will marry me, Alexandra," he said, with a sad, puzzled smile, "if you promise me that."

"O, no!" she cried, at once, shrinking back, and changing, in a moment, from a vision of enchantment to a frightened,

sullen-tempered child. "I won't marry you! I couldn't do that."

"But you promised!" cried Lee, with weary vehemence. "Only just now you promised! Why can't you keep to one thing or the other? First you say you will, and then you say you can't. Why can't you? Don't you care for me enough?"

"Yes, I do care for you," she replied, with a little frown of disappointment, and an angry sob. "Since you took care o' me and spoke kind and kissed me, I care for you a lot."

Despite her pettishness, her childish obstinacy, her tears, her enchanting wealth of tenderness, she was observing very closely the effect of every word upon the scripture reader. What she saw in his face, racked as it was with pain and a dreadful apprehension, emboldened her to speak still more clearly.

"You do care for me, don't you?" she asked, as though she doubted.

"O, yes, dear! I know I do that," he said, with another wan smile.

"You can't do without me now, can you?"

Lee looked away, a deathly pallor on his face; great drops of perspiration stood on his ashen forehead. He said nothing.

"Don't you—don't you want to 'ave me in your arms again?" she softly asked, with childish wonder.

"Don't speak to me!" cried Lee, in a choked voice, and with averted face. "I asked you to marry me, and you propose a great wickedness. I tell you I want to marry you."

"Well, don't you want to kiss me?" she asked, with the same bewitching artlessness of tone.

Lee's face was hidden in his arms. The bells of St. Mark's, hard by, filled the small, dingy room with their harsh, clamorous call. They clashed, discordantly, with Alexandra's soft, alluring voice.

"You seemed to like kissin' a while ago," she went on, in a tone of pique. "I wonder you ain't more keen to go on with 'em, considerin' they was the fust you'd ever gived or took."

"How—how dare you say that!" stammered Lee, raising his head.

His passionate agitation misled her. She fancied he resented her home thrust.

"Well, they was the fust," she said, nodding, wisely, with over-bright eyes. "Lor! I've 'ad and give kisses afore, and I knows,—I does!"

"I cannot listen," said Lee, unsteadily approaching her, and almost inarticulate in his terrible excitement. "I cannot listen to you any more!" He seized her hands. "For the last time, Alexandra, will you marry me?"

She looked at him, the incarnation of relentless fate.

"I'll love you, and I'll stay with you," she said, with obstinacy, not flinching at his gaze; "but I won't marry you,"

"Well, tell me," said Lee, speaking with still greater difficulty, "why you will live with me as my wife, and yet will not marry me."

"'Cause I don't believe in marriage," was her quick and steady answer. "We might get tired o' each other, and then we're everlastin' bound, and the law's so quick to nab you." She shivered. "And I'm young, you're young; we can't be the same always, we must change——"

"Oh, no," he said, with a gesture of intolerable pain, "I do not change like that."

"I'm like this," said Alexandra, thoughtfully, but with a terrible and convincing tone of firmly-rooted prejudice. "If I were tied to a man by law, I should fust go mad with thinkin' of it, and then kill you, or else run away—I'd feel like a bird in a cage."

"You pain me when you talk like that," said Lee, with pallid lips. "You do not

mean it. You are not so wicked as you try to make out."

"But I don't see the great 'arm of it," pouted Alexandra. "You want me and I want you; and I don't—I tell you, I don't see 'ow a parson jawin' over us makes it good and 'oly, if without his jaw it's wicked and un'oly."

"Now, you wrong yourself most monstrously!"

She laughed a little rippling laugh. In it was hidden the epitome of her resolve. It voiced her appalling independence and the insuperable nature of her obstinacy. Seeking to drive her from her fortified position, Lee found himself broken on its outworks, and their barred hostility supreme.

"Well, good or wicked, I'm like that; I don't keer about goodness if I want things all the other way," said Alexandra, in reply, turning her wrists a little within Lee's clasp.

At once he freed his hands from hers,

which she put up to her braided head, to arrange the golden curls that fell about her forehead.

Lee staggered to a chair and put his hands before his face ; while Alexandra went softly to the cupboard, and, taking out her cap and jacket, began slowly, and with many puzzled, thoughtful looks at him, to put them on.

"Well, good-bye," she said, at last, fully equipped, and approaching Lee, with a jauntiness of voice and manner she did not feel. "Don't take on! I'll take care of myself for the future—but you take care of yourself, Baby!"

Lee rose to his feet. Her mockery left no impression on his cruelly crushed spirit.

"Good-bye!" he said, taking her hand in his, which was as cold as that of one from whom the breath had fled. "Good—good-bye! Let me help—when—if I can. . . ." He stumbled among many empty words, "Take care of yourself," he proceeded,

trembling, as her hand clasped frankly over his.

She smiled at him, a smile half wild, half sad.

"O! I'll take the best o' care," she replied.

"O! Alexandra, dear," he cried, "you are not going to *that* life!"

His agitation was frightful to behold. The girl assumed a desperate composure.

"Yes," she said, at last, with pale, though steady lips; "you've cast me off, and I'm goin' on the street."

"Don't tempt me, dear," he pleaded.

"Well, I won't, then—I'll go. Good-bye!"

"But I can't let you go to that," cried Lee. "You know—why, God Almighty Himself knows—I cannot!"

"You've called me dear, and kissed me, and held me close to you," pleaded Alexandra, then, in her turn. Her wondrous eyes looked mournfully into his, before she turned and faltered towards the door. "You've called

me darlin' as if you did love me. How can you let me go to—to—to—you know what?"

"I cannot," he said, drawing her back again. "I cannot."

"You don't mean it, truly! 'Tis your cunnin', to see if you can't get it your way, after all. But you won't."

She tried to pull her hands from his, but found them helplessly imprisoned.

"Is it on'y to try me?" she asked, in tearful excitement; "or is it really to be?"

"It's to be."

"But—but as I like, or it'll never, never be!"

"As—you—like."

CHAPTER IV.

MICHAEL ANGELO.

"THEM bloomin' old bells 'ave begun agin," said Alexandra, with a toss of her fair head, window-wards; "I s'pose church is over."

Some hours had now elapsed since Lee's unimaginable surrender, and Alexandra had installed herself as mistress of the scripture reader's room, and this in the actual presence of the unastonished landlady.

"You're poor, you say," the girl remarked, with one of her bright, elusive smiles. "I guess two'll be able to shift where one 'as, 'specially if the other one's a woman like me. I'm a first-rate manager."

This was her first, but not her last presentment as the resourceful, unembarrassed housewife. Alexandra had the fresh beauty

of a girl, the intuition and the knowledge of a woman, a child's unrestricted zest in life, and the serpent's art in making black look white. But she was, in fact, more a kaleidoscopic train of awfully unexpected phases, than she was girl, woman, child, or serpent.

Lee regarded her with grave, cheerless mien, the while she moved about; his unflattering depression deepening every moment. It was wonderful how, adding nothing to the room's contents, except her airy presence, Alexandra contrived, by a few touches, a hasty rearrangement of his larger furniture, and a judicious adjustment of the smaller knick-knacks, including his few poor books, to make the room look neat and tasteful, and, at the same time, eminently homelike.

"I can knit beautiful," said Alexandra, in a confiding outburst, and with coaxing appeal in her eyes for his approval. "I guess I'll knit your socks."

"Thank you, dear," said the scrip-

ture reader, moved to smile, despite his gloom.

The girl threw her apron over her head (she had borrowed it of the submissive Mrs. Gibbets) and rocked with laughter. This hilarious side of hers had already been foreshadowed by her obtrusive mirth, on a previous occasion. For all his frown, Lee seemed to find her laughter not unpleasant.

"I 'spect you're frettin' 'cause I've kept you away from church to-day," said Alexandra, sympathetically. "If you like, we'll go to church this evenin'."

Lee winced.

"We'll see about it," was all he said.

This was at their mid-day dinner. Lee had sat down to table with many mixed emotions contending for supremacy—emotions whose immensity and complexity were hard to fathom.

Alexandra played her *rôle* of mistress with unembarrassed ease, and an unabashed delight that went far to take away the keen edge of

Lee's enthralling awkwardness. As often as she met his eyes she broke into a bewitching smile. She plied him with artless questions as to his daily work and past career. It was more easy for him to prove to her how tame and uneventful was his life, than to explain the details of a scripture reader's occupation. She sighed.

"I shan't see much of you, I guess," she said, with a dreary shrug.

"I am going to leave St. Mark's," he said, to that, with pale, steady lips. "I shall send in my resignation as scripture reader, to-night, to the vicar."

"Good Lord! Why?" asked Alexandra, in genuine amazement.

"If you do not know why," he replied, with emphasis, "I prefer not to tell you."

"You mean me?"

Lee went on eating his dinner, making no reply.

"I won't 'ave you leave 'ere for me, where you've bin respected and loved ever

since you was a baby," cried Alexandra, passionately.

"I shall do in this matter what—what I think right," said Lee, firmly, but with a noticeable break.

"D'you think you'll git another place, to-day?" she asked, sarcastically. "Or do you mean to go round beggin' with a 'at, and me 'angin' on your arm? 'Ow d'you s'pose we're goin' to live to-morrow, if you chucks up to-day?"

"I do not know, but I'd rather starve than receive their wage on false pretences."

"'Tisn't false pretences," said Alexandra, with a pout. "You do their work the same, and that's all they pays you for—not to live like the good boy in story books. And you don't keer if I starves."

"You will not starve," was the weary answer.

"I thought," Alexandra murmured, looking at him with curious, dreamy eyes, "you'd rather no one knowed there was anythink

—anythink wrong in our way of livin !
I thought nobody was to know we're not
prop'ly married. If you chucked up on a
sudden, takin' me with you, you don't s'pose
folks is all babies, and can't put two and two
together, do you?"

"I would rather people knew the truth,
than live among them, acting a lie—my
whole life a great, wicked lie!" cried Lee,
vehemently.

"You thinks only of yourself," wailed
Alexandra. "You're just like all the rest!
You forget tellin' what you are tells what I
am. And no one minds it in a man; but in
a woman"—her breath stayed one minute on
a choking sob—" 'tis thought awful shameful.
The 'ole world's down on 'er, and 'er life's
spoilt for always."

The colour parted from his lips.

"I forgot that. Well, I'll stay, if I see
no reasonable opening for going away and
earning another sort of living."

The joylessness of his face would have

touched a heart of stone. Alexandra came round to where he sat, and, kneeling at his side, held up her pleading mouth and her two hands ; her eyes were filled with tears of sorrow and remorse.

"I'm sorry you feel like this," she said. "Why must you fret over it? Will I only be an un'happiness and 'urt to you, always?"

She had taken his resistless hands in hers, and laid them on her bended shoulders, and held them fast there. Two tears started from her beseeching eyes, and trickled, slowly, down her cheeks.

"Will I never give you nothink but pain?"

He had not been man had he not softened in his pity and his great love.

"You will make me happy, Alexandra," he replied, pressing his face to hers ; "you will make me very happy."

Alexandra's moods were as elusive as were her smiles and tears. She liked the pressure of Lee's sad face against her own,

and the drawing of his arms around her ; and told him so, with appalling frankness.

Lee sighed ; but held her closer. Alexandra had all the gaiety : for he was oppressed with more than love ; though love, thwarted for one moment by her staggering repulse, burned, fiercely, with consuming fire, when her lips again met his, and her soft, warm body nestled in his arms.

At last he spoke. His voice was full of hesitation.

"You do love me?" was what he said.

"O, yes ; a lot ! Else I shouldn't ha' took up with you," was the candid, blithe response ; "I ain't the sort o' gal to take up with any feller just 'cause he's a man," she added, in ostentatious pride at her own virtue. "That I does call right low down meanness, and no mistake. I'm not that lot, bad as you think me."

"I love you!" he said, passionately, to that. "Do not say any more about what you are or are not—you are mine!"

Alexandra lifted to her lover eyes in which mischief and exultation were curiously blended. She laughed, and Lee looked angrily surprised.

"Why, we've been makin' love these two hours!" she began, and then broke off in another tempest of unseasonable laughter.

"We have done nothing of the sort!" cried Lee, the scarlet flying to his cheeks. "I merely told you that I loved you."

"Two hours ago"—she panted, struggling with hysteria.

"And I tell you I love you again, now. I do not call that making love for two hours. I—I never make love!"

"I don't s'pose you do—much!" gasped Alexandra. "Don't kill me with larfin'! But two hours or twenty—don't nothink strike you funny about us?"

"Nothing!" cried the scripture reader, with blazing eyes. "I think we are possessed with devils—but not *funny*!"

"Well," she returned, with sparkling em-

phasia and some feigned pique, "I'd 'ave noticed if you 'adn't called me by my Christian name once, durin' two hours'—er—talkin'! Seemin' you don't want me to call you anythink but Mr. Lee."

"My other name is Michael," said the scripture reader, gloomily.

"H'm!"

"Don't you like it?" he asked, with enforced calmness.

"No. An' Mike's too doggy."

"I will not let you call me Mike!"

"I shall," retorted Alexandra, with another gleam of mischief. "When you're a bad boy I shall call you Mike till you gets good agin."

She played, caressingly, with a few disordered locks of hair that fell across his forehead. Lee's will ceased not to fight against the overwhelming forces that attacked his soul. Conscience trumpeted his fall, until his brain became confused with the clamour of its tongue, and bade him, at least, no

further damn his soul by taking pleasure in the sin.

But the whole passionate nature of the man, repressed for years, had burst from the encrusted shell of lifelong self-denial, and set itself in fierce revolt to his better self's decree. He recognised, with bitterness (Alexandra's soft, sweet voice babbling many loving, foolish things), that he was even more degraded than he thought. He did take pleasure—a fierce, rapturous pleasure—in hearing her half-mocking, half-endearing chatter; in feeling the touch of her soft fingers on his face; in the warm clasp of her hand.

Probing the deep recesses of his heart, he saw himself swept off his feet and carried, by the tide of his own passions, into unpardonable acquiescence. Outwardly he was pledged to bend to her inflexible decree, for better or for worse. He durst not show her all the tenderness he felt; and he assumed, in his great stress, a cold, grave mien,

that neither deceived the girl, nor duped his own accusing spirit. He loathed himself, according to the measure of his own unrighteous pleasure. Apart from that conscience-stricken rapture, his passion brought him but the recompense of pain and self-reproach.

Alexandra, irresponsive to his gloomy mood, continued to provoke him. She called him "Mike," and whistled, as a dog fancier whistles to his terrier.

"I shall not answer if you call me by that idiotic nickname!" he cried, with a heat absurdly disproportionate to the trivial nature of the joke. "I refuse to allow you."

Alexandra hugged herself with secret satisfaction. Another of her shafts had found its mark, and, by it, she had transformed her austere lover into a being she could understand.

"P'r'aps, Mr. Michael Lee," she said, with a wicked sparkle in her lowered eyes, "you've got another name. I must call

you somethink, mustn't I, if you calls me Alexandra?"

"Michael will do very well," replied Lee, stiffly.

"'Ave you?"

"I have."

"What is it, pray?"

"It—it is," stammered Lee, with an expression of actual shamefacedness,—“but you cannot call me by it. It would be absurd, and I should not allow it. But it is Angelo.”

Alexandra clapped her hands.

"Why, that's better than a thousand Mikes or Michaels!"

"Alexandra, I—I am acting as if I did not care what wickedness I enter upon, but I—I refuse to be made ridiculous in this way. I forbid you to call me Angelo."

"Well, then, I'll call you 'Angel'. I couldn't call you Michael, and you won't let me call you Mike or Angelo, so I'll call you Angel; it's a lovely name for you. May I, darling?"

To that request, uttered in Alexandra's most seductive voice, Lee groaned, inaudibly, in an anguish of despair.

When Alexandra said, "I will call you Angel," he started, winced, and turned a deadly white. The bitter irony of it struck right home. He listened to the rest of her childish little speech as if in a waking dream.

When she said "May I?" and tacked the lovable endearment at the end of her request (it was the first of its kind she had addressed to him) the blood rushed, hotly, to his face.

He wondered, while he drew the girl again to him, whether that name, so horribly ironical, was but another wile of Satan's to steep him further in impenitence.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE VESTRY OF ST. MARK'S.

THE church of St. Mark's was open and empty, except for a hungry-eyed pew opener. The vicar, yielding to the pressure of his curates, had consented to open the doors at noon, and again at six, on week days, for prayer and meditation. But the members of his flock who took advantage of the privilege were very few ; although the curates had, for several years, been representing to their chief that the need of a sanctuary for an hour or two, each working day, was a crying one among the thousands of work people and small shopkeepers in St Mark's parish.

It was an evening late in January : an evening of intense cold. Snow had fallen during the week, and the streets presented

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the loathsome appearance that always follows a snowstorm in London.

A man turned, hurriedly, out of the keen air, into the vestry, where another man, tall, broad, and of dignified, if somewhat heavy aspect, was waiting within. This was Woolcombe, the vicar of St. Mark's. He shaved himself clean every morning, for convenience sake, only. Woolcombe strongly disapproved what he called "Romish innovations," and was moved to warmth at the sight of the incipient tonsures on his curates' heads.

The new comer was his scripture reader, Michael Lee. In his own words, the Rev. Arnold Woolcombe "was deeply attached" to Lee. He considered Lee "a true servant of the Lord," and a "sturdy follower of the Divine precepts". Lee loved his vicar. Mr. Woolcombe was no bigot ; he had too much charity and largeness of heart. Both men had worked together for upwards of ten years, side by side, in deadly warfare against the World, the Flesh, and the Devil. Such

a bond endears men to each other more than do any ties of blood.

"Be pleased to take a chair, Lee," said the vicar, in his ponderous, lengthy way, giving and receiving a hearty handshake. "You are not late. Sit down, will you not? What I wish to speak to you about (his face, thoughtful since Lee entered, now deepened into gravity) will, I fear, take a little time. I shall not regret that, busy as we are at this time of the year, if our talk ends satisfactorily. But what I am afraid of, Lee, is that we may both find it painful before that (I do not doubt) satisfactory termination."

Lee sat down on a chair facing his superior. The light from a jet of gas shone straight upon him. Nature had given to the scripture reader a face responsive to each wave of passion that passed over him within; but long ere this he had learned, in a bitter school, that a scripture reader is equipped but poorly, if he has not a mask which may conceal his all too forcible emotions.

His self-possession was not always equal to the exigencies of the moment, and sometimes he betrayed, to an intelligent observer, more than even he supposed himself to be capable of feeling. But since that memorable and fatal night, when Alexandra entered on the scene, he had kept so close a guard upon his features as to baffle even the keenest-witted critics of his so-called "marriage".

"Lee," began the vicar, abruptly, though not unkindly, and bending his gaze upon the scripture reader, "I am going to speak plainly to you, to-night, and I ask that you will treat me to a similar frankness. I ask it with all my heart and soul."

Lee's lips tightened. He bowed his head, as if in acquiescence.

"Lee, are you in any trouble?"

By Lee this question had been long expected, and with an intolerable dread. He parried it, with pallid lips and a forced smile.

"What trouble should I be in, sir?" he

asked, in his turn, in a slightly husky tone. "You have raised my salary since—my marriage—for which I can never sufficiently express my gratitude. And I am enjoying better health than I have had for a long time. And ill health and penury," he added, with another wan smile, "are, after all, the most important personal troubles that can assail man."

"I do not agree with you. I am surprised to hear you say so," remarked Mr. Woolcombe, with dry emphasis. "Still, that is not the question before us. You have not answered mine yet."

"If you ask for a more direct answer," replied Lee, with heightened colour and quickening breath, "I am in no trouble. I am—I am very happy."

The vicar had hardly yet recovered from his amazement, or, rather, his august displeasure, at Lee's precipitancy in the matter of his marriage. The petty detail of Lee's previous silence did not trouble him at all.

The scripture rearder had avowed himself a married man of two days old, early on Boxing Day, just as another man might confess to a cold in the head.

In his astonishment and dismay at the intelligence, Woolcombe forgot to question Lee as to his motives for secrecy. Almost he considered it natural that Lee, his mind once made up to the "fatal step" (for thus the vicar called the marriage, in gloomy converse with his senior curate), should shrink from announcing his determination until it should have been accomplished.

That Lee had taken as his wife a very young, entirely unknown girl, but fitted in with his decision to be married out of the parish in which he had been born, baptised, confirmed, and lived and worked.

Alexandra made few friends among Lee's neighbours, and she explicitly refused to aid him in good works. But the curates, when their calculative minds had faltered over some appalling figures anent Lee's income, and the

cost of the most frugal *ménage*, at once accepted the scripture reader's wife, both as acquaintance and potential coadjutor in the parish work. Woolcombe admired her heartily, as a work of nature (Alexandra had assumed her prettiest and most bewitching airs and graces for the vicar's benefit); but shook his head, in secret, over Lee's infatuation.

"I am glad you are in better health remarked the vicar, gravely, to Lee's last reply. "I think you are. You look stronger."

There was an air of personal well-being about the scripture reader now, that, in his earlier years, had not been his. The vicar was not a sufficiently keen observer of men to see the steadfast sadness in Lee's eyes, or the iron rigidity of a mouth, curved, naturally, to respond to every thought.

"Well, Lee,"—Woolcombe cleared his throat for another formal period—"the painful part of this interview is still to come. If you are in no domestic trouble, are you

—I do not ask as your vicar; I do not, as you know, approve priestly interference between God and man; I ask you as your friend—are you in any spiritual trouble?”

“O, no,” replied Lee, not flinching under the earnest gaze, but *reaching* painfully, “I am in no spiritual trouble.”

“Difficulty?” suggested Woolcombe; but Lee shook his head with some of the fierceness of an outraged spirit.

“Then, if it is not trouble, Lee,” said the vicar, his voice rising in volume with every trenchant word, “what is it—*what is it*, Lee, that keeps you from the Holy Table?—you who used to attend with unfailing regularity. . . . Since Christmas morning, —No! If my memory serves me rightly, it was the Sunday before Christmas that you last knelt at our Lord’s Table, Lee.”

The scripture reader’s face was immovable as stone. To his eyes there had sprung the look that caged things wear, behind their

bars. But his head drooped low, and his eyelids covered his despair.

"Have you nothing to say, Lee?"

"Well . . . let me think, Mr. Woolcombe," faltered the scripture reader, "I—I think I can explain, sir, only I—I must think."

"Think, by all means," replied Woolcombe, drily.

"It was like this, sir," said Lee, raising a desperate face to his confronter, and breaking, abruptly, into hoarse, jerky speech. "On Christmas Day I had truly meant to attend. I had prepared—indeed I had! When—when I found myself making use again of a—the strong expression I have tried so long to break myself of! I—I allude, sir, to my unfortunate habit of saying 'damn' when I am angry."

The vicar gasped, audibly; and the perspiration streamed from the scripture reader's forehead, while he floundered, miserably, desperately, through the mire of his questionable and absurd equivocations.

"It was through no disrespect or disinclination, sir, believe me," he went on, still more huskily, his inventive powers failing him at this crisis. "But I did not feel fit—my mood ——"

"You must be mad!" burst in the vicar, articulate, at last. "Lee! this is the tone of morbid insanity, not of a God-fearing, sturdy Christian like yourself!"

"Believe me, believe me, Mr. Woolcombe," replied the unfortunate scripture reader, with an appealing look, "I am often very, very unsure of my claim to be called a Christian, at all."

"Lee, you astonish me, you distress me more than I can tell you," went on Woolcombe, taking scanty notice of Lee's last words. "This new note in you smacks of Rome. May I ask then," he pursued, sternly, "whether you thought that an intemperate expression you used on Christmas Day, and repented—mark me, doubtless, on

the spot—was a reason to abstain for a month afterwards?”

“There—there was something else then! I—I forget—exactly,” stammered the scripture reader, with a face of tragic despair.

“You forget? Lee, this is childish! Man! you are unstrung! You are trembling from head to foot! Why, you must be in trouble—in mental trouble!”

“No! no!” returned the other, recoiling, as the vicar quickly rose and came towards him. “You would not call it trouble; an ordinary man would think it nothing.”

He was sinking in the quicksands of deceit, and, making a step forward, towards firmer ground, precipitately fell into a deeper sea of absurdities.

“But I know it was something important,” he cried, piteously, “something not to be overlooked. I mean it is my hideous temper!” He almost shrieked aloud in desperation. “I—when I feel it striving within, I—I dare not come!”

"Lee!" said the vicar, with gravity and wonder, laying his hand on the shoulder of the trembling man, "Lee!"

The scripture reader turned white to his lips. Had Woolcombe spoken one more word of suasion or of appeal, Lee's fortitude had given way, and he had cast himself, in agonised confession, at the vicar's feet.

The pregnant moment passed. No word proceeded from Woolcombe: he was too occupied with wonder and dismay. Then Alexandra's girl-like face rose up before her lover, with the tear-stains and the piteous look it bore when she pleaded, so successfully, the different worldly status held by male and female sinners; and he realised that what had been was, now, irrevocable, and their joint sin already written in the judgment books of God. With a weary gesture, he freed himself from Woolcombe's hold, and turned to face him.

"Perhaps I am morbid," he suggested,

with the same deprecating smile that concealed so much of bitterness.

"Morbid!" cried Woolcombe, "I think you are wrong—hideously wrong! Nay, I think—I must speak plainly, Lee, it is for your good—I think you are wicked."

"Yes, I think that too, myself," said Lee, in a low, sad voice.

"Hey? What's that? I'll tell you what, Lee, this is not like you! It is most unlike you! I cannot help thinking it is Rome, after all! Lee, I am genuinely amazed and deeply grieved!"

There were tears in the big man's eyes. His voice shook with the emotion he made no effort to repress. His grief increased Lee's agitation.

"Well, I will think of what you say," he said, wringing the vicar's hand. "And I will bring myself to come—indeed I will." Woolcombe's iron hand held the scripture reader's in a vice. "And—and, Mr. Woolcombe," Lee continued, faltering still more

before his look of pity and concern, "I will say good-night now—I am not—quite—master of myself, and I—I——"

A moment later the vestry door slammed to, and a man ran violently down the street. His footsteps rang out on the pavement, and many people in the houses that he passed identified them for the scripture reader's.

"I cannot bear this any longer," ran his thoughts. He slackened pace, on entering a lighter, broader thoroughfare. A scourging wind had dried his tears, and the few pedestrians abroad turned to look at him, inquiringly.

He recalled the vicar's gloom when he prognosticated his scripture reader's lapse to Romanism, and a frown appeared upon his brow. "I am no Romanist," he thought, "and this would grieve Woolcombe to his heart's core if he knew. But I—I can no longer bear the weight of this alone." Another sob broke from his labouring

chest. "I—God help me!—I must confess to some one!"

Lee had left St. Mark's without a thought of whither he was going. After his last despairing outburst, he went on, quickly, with a steadfast purpose and a goal in view. That goal was a little gothic church, in which a priest attended, three evenings in the week, to hear confessions. Lee knew it well, by hearsay, though he had never set foot in it, himself. He entered it, with vague emotions, like one about to take a leap into the dark, and with a haunting dread that he might perpetrate some error that even priestly tolerance could not condone.

When he came out again into the keen night air, he looked like one who saw, for the first time, the naked blackness of his soul. He asked himself, with painful introspection, whether he felt eased in spirit at having laid his sins before a minister of God, and was forced, sadly, to admit that all that had re-

sulted from his act was an added weight to his perplexities.

The priest had bade him marry her with whom he lived in sin; and when he had asked for absolution, pleading his anguish as a sign of penitence, the priest had reminded him that true penitence lay in deeds, not words, and again told him to make the girl his wife. Alexandra's sin was not his own, and he reserved her name for the Almighty's ear alone. But he could not tell the priest (when he bade him, for the third and last time, wed the woman) that the obstacle to the course prescribed was solely the wrong-headedness of that woman.

Alexandra met him in the doorway of their little room, a loving thing, this night, all tenderness, caressing words, and smiles, behind which tears lay perilously close. She was in one of her most enchanting moods; and the magical effect of it was heightened by her way of dropping, suddenly, without warning, into

laughter, in the midst of her most tender periods.

She took off his hat and comforter, and assisted to remove his coat, as if he were some loved and helpless child. She would have knelt and taken off his boots, but that he would not allow. She contented herself with putting his slippers on her own pretty feet, and flapping about the floor in them.

Finally, she settled in her favourite place between Lee's knees, and held her pretty face up for his kisses. Her lack of coquetry in this simple action was artless to the verge of babyishness. For all his intimate acquaintance with this side of her character, Lee had failed to school his heart to any measure of composure. It throbbed, painfully, while he bent forward in obedience to her speaking eyes.

"I want to talk to you, Alexandra," he began.

"It's supper time!" she cried, with alacrity, and would have sprung to her feet, but Lee

held her fast. She sank back to the floor, her body resting lightly against his knees.

"Darling," he said, with a sad, pleading mouth, "don't you ever think what a happy home ours would be if we were only married?"

"I think it's a very happy home now—poor as it is," replied Alexandra, pouting, partly out of pure love of mischief. "I'm always happy, 'cept when you're cross, like you are now."

"But I am never happy, Alexandra."

His sad voice vibrated with his pain. She winced, but quickly recovered herself.

"Then I think you're a pig!" she cried, with unnecessary vehemence, "when I try and make you 'appy all I can!"

"So you do, dear; so you do—I didn't mean that. I meant—O Alexandra! do let us marry!"

She avoided his beseeching eyes by nestling her head into his waistcoat, and pretending to be listening to the beating of his heart.

Then she declared she could not hear it ; and was assured, as, all along, she had suspected, that he had not any, or, if so, one of stone.

The constant war between his passions and the self-repression that he had set himself, involved Lee in a ceaseless purgatory. Instead of taking her to his breast, as, despite himself, he would have done, had his self-denying resolution not been fixed on such immutable foundations, he only said again, in broken tones :—

“Alexandra, dearest, do—do let us marry”.

“We can’t,” she returned, demurely, to his second appeal. “Folks don’t marry at night.”

“Not to-night ! you know I didn’t mean that. But to-morrow—at a registry.”

“Good ’Eavens !” she returned, addressing the ceiling, with affected amazement. “We can’t afford meat every day, we’re so bloomin’ poor, and this man talks of registries !”

"Do you know what I ought to do?" said Lee, after a painful silence.

"Yes—kiss me."

"I ought to leave you to-night, and never come near you again."

For the moment she looked scared; but there was an unfaltering brightness in her eyes.

"You can't," she said, in a voice made up of pain and triumph. "You jest jolly well can't!"

"No; I cannot. You are right there! I cannot."

"If you ought to leave me," said Alexandra, thoughtfully; "I ought to leave you."

"O! . . . Yes."

"Well, I don't want to—there!"

"Do you love me?"

"Course I do, Baby! Ain't I tellin' you so, always?"

This was hardly accurate. Her affections were, by nature, unspontaneous, and circumstance begat the fuel that fed her tiny flame of love.

"If you'll smile and look pretty," she said, coaxingly, since Lee preserved a stony silence, "I'll tell you jest exactly why I won't marry you."

"That you will not is enough for me," said Lee. "I do not want again to hear your reasons. I know they are absurd and wicked."

This started something like a panic in Alexandra's breast, and a little flow of tears. Seeing him still unmoved, her apology once more assumed a verbal form.

"'Tis only for your sake!" she declaimed, "only for your sake I won't marry you."

Lee gave vent to a short, incredulous laugh.

"I'm only a silly lot," sniffed Alexandra, pathetically; "and you're a lot thought of by them three preachin' May-poles——"

"To whom do you allude?" broke in Lee, with desperate calmness and glowing eyes.

"What's 'al-lude'?"

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"O!—I—I calls the parson and the two curicks 'May-poles,' 'cause they're so big, longways," explained Alexandra, with timid impudence. "But I won't if you don't like, Angel, dear."

"I do not like!"

"Well . . . I won't then—but they are like! Well! I think often and often," she went on, hurriedly, with more than a suspicion of feverish hysteria, "that I'm not fit for your wife, anyhow. I'm not 'arf good enough——"

"Don't talk like that!" he broke in, vehemently. "I would rather hear you say anything in the world—that you hate me even—only do not—once for all, do not say you are not good enough for me! I cannot bear that!"

She stared, with wonder, into his working face.

"Well, I won't say it," she said again. "But I think, seein' as we're so—so diff'rent,

you and I, you might want to get shook o' me sometime."

"Alexandra! Are you pleading for yourself, and your own probable desires now?"

"D'you mean do I reckon I'll want to get quit o' you?" she answered, with a merry laugh. Seeing the torture in his eyes, she suddenly relented. "'Twas only to tease you, Angel, dear," she whispered, softly. "I do love you, and I don't want ever to leave you, never. But we won't hev no law or parson with us. You might want to marry some decent girl some day, and I'd be in the way then, if you was tied to me."

"I shall never marry," Lee replied, austere.

Alexandra giggled.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNUTTERED PRAYER.

"THEN you are goin' to early church, Angel?"

"I am."

"Well. . . . I'm jiggered if I won't go with you, then!"

"Do not speak in that irreverent way, Alexandra. I cannot bear to hear you."

"Do not speak in that parsonish way, Michael Angelo Lee. I cannot bear to hear you."

This conversation occurred in the scripture reader's home, early one Sunday morning, at a dark, cheerless hour. Alexandra was in a mood of chastened gaiety. Lee looked as a man is thought to look when he is going to the gallows.

"I dare not bid you stay away," he gloomily remarked.

Alexandra shook her head at him, and screwed up her eyebrows in a frightful grimace. She was engaged in doing up her hair, and the tresses fell in yellow waves about her shoulders, and down her back. She held one lock she had singled from the mass, between her rosy lips, and could make no verbal reply. Lee pulled on his boots, and, from time to time, stole furtive, foreboding glances at her.

She was ready first, and pulled him by the arm as he was standing, in a brown study, staring from the window. When he started and turned to her, she saw that he was still without gloves, comforter, and overcoat. It was then he drew her to him, and asked her whether she would kneel with him and say "Amen" to a prayer he was going to say for two unhappy creatures.

The girl responded with a sprightly nod; though she knew well who were those two

unhappy ones for whom her lover was about to pray. She sank down to her knees, with ostentatious acquiescence, and Lee knelt by her side. But when he came to raise his voice on their behalf, he found himself unable to speak for a growing lump in his throat.

Alexandra preserved a devout silence. Twice the man essayed to speak, and twice was conquered by emotion. At last, his self-possession left him, and he swayed forward, dropping his head upon his hands, and sobbed aloud.

A titter, long pent up, had only just escaped from Alexandra. But it lapsed, abruptly, into a little cry of pity and dismay, at sight of Lee's abandonment. She sprang to her feet, and put her arms around her lover's neck.

"Don't cry, darlin'!" she faltered, with tears in her own voice and in her eyes, so responsive were her sympathies when her heart was with them.

Lee stumbled to his feet, overmastered by his emotion, and, with her arms clasped tenderly about him, laid his face, as if for comfort, upon her breast.

"Don't cry, Angel, dear!" she murmured, wishing to console him. "We'll be sayin' a lot of prayers along with the parson and the other folks in church. So not sayin' one more doesn't matter, does it?"

CHAPTER VII.

ALEXANDRA TELLS THE SCRIPTURE READER SOME NEWS.

THE scripture reader of St Mark's was like a man who has fallen headlong into an abyss, and suffered, by the fall, in the place of physical dismemberment, the total shattering of a moral image.

In accordance with the law of nature, Lee came to full knowledge of his ruin only by slow degrees. In his case there was a strong, internal stimulus to the natural causes that kept his slumbering senses in their moral swoon ; and this was the man's own weaker nature. But, even in his most quiescent moments, Lee's purer self never rested from its ceaseless war against his frailer self ; and, through his constant struggle between flesh

and spirit, he was forced, at last, to realise, in all its vast immensity, the soul-destroying consequences of his fall.

The first issue of his love for Alexandra was to plunge him into a moral quagmire, from which he sought an outlet on all sides from which escape was impossible, turning his back, deliberately, on the one and only exit. That mode of egress was as clear as was his own soul's duty, and was none other than the stepping stone that each man bears about with him—his own naked heart. Lee's notion of his duty was singularly clear, and he knew, from the beginning, that he had that saving aid within himself. .

But to tear out one's bleeding heart and use it as a stepping stone, even if one steps, thereby, from hell to heaven, requires more faith than most of us possess. Besides, Lee loved the girl as men do love, who, having grown to manhood and maturity without a single tender episode, surrender, unconditionally, to Love's first strong assault.

For awhile, the weaker spirit in the man triumphed over the stronger. The fateful warfare raged by day and night, and, at last, the issue of the battle was reversed. Lee awoke to the full consciousness of his guilt, and, in that awakening, his higher self knew, by the measure of its agony, that it had conquered.

When the tremendous truth came home to him he was alone, in the poor room that Alexandra's presence had brightened for some thirty days and nights. Alexandra was out marketing, for it was Saturday.

Lee had come in, from a round of sick beds, when the evening was advanced. Influenza was raging in the parish, and the scripture reader added, on emergencies, the lighter duties of a doctor, to the severer ones belonging to his office.

As a rule, he went with Alexandra on her Saturday night excursions ; but this evening, on his late arrival home, he found the room untenanted, and a little, badly-written note,

ill-spelt, but full of loving words, from Alexandra, on the table, telling him she could wait no longer for him, and therefore had gone out, but that she was still his "luvin' Alexandra," and he was her "darlin' boy".

He was holding this fond, but illiterate-looking letter in his hand, at the moment when he had come to the determination to have nothing more to do with Alexandra. His purpose had no sooner taken hold of him than an awful truth confronted him: he prized the love of Alexandra more than he feared the righteous wrath of God!

So desperate was his state of mind at this discovery, that he fell on his knees, and prayed that his resolve to act aright might be upheld throughout the bitter time to come. His prayer was so intense that it left him faint and breathless; and he was helpless to collect his thoughts, in order to prepare for the ordeal.

His room was all in darkness, except for

the feeble firelight; and he stood by the window, looking into, but not seeing, the gas-lit street below. When he heard the banging of the street door and Alexandra's footsteps on the stairs, he started, and recovered from his partial self-abstraction; but he did not move from his place.

His back was to the door; and Alexandra, who had bounded, more than walked into the room, seized by some playful impulse when she entered and saw his gloomy figure in the dark, took up a good-sized cabbage from her basket, and hurled it at his head.

This was hardly the sort of greeting to have fanned love's flame in any breast. But the shock (it sent Lee staggering forward) and Alexandra's peal of laughter had a marvellous effect. At her laugh, for the time being, all notion of renunciation left him, and he only thought of what she was to him. Alexandra, still hysterically inclined, stirred up the fire until it shed a ruddy light upon the hearth; then she set light to the lamp. Something in Lee's

face, his speechlessness and his immobility, sobered her outburst, but not her mood.

"Why, you ain't ever ill, Angel, are you?" she cried, coming over, quickly, to where he leaned against the wall.

Again the spell was broken, and Lee repulsed her, fiercely; resolution driving out its baser rival from his soul.

"Bless me!" cried Alexandra, somewhat piqued. "I reckon I've knocked you silly with that old cabbage head."

Her really admirable temper was restored, before she had taken off her outdoor clothing. By the time she had smoothed down her sunny braids of hair, she was all smiles, and seemed anxious to make friends, and approached him with the winning diffidence of a child who has been wilful and now seeks forgiveness. Lee's heart knocked against his ribs as though to break its bonds.

"I want to speak!" he broke out, in a voice that was only just articulate; and he

waved her back. "I want to speak, and you make it impossible for me."

The girl stopped short in her advances.

"What are you jawin' about?" she asked, with a puzzled stare. "Can't you talk plain?"

"Well, don't come near me," he continued, hoarsely. "And do—for very pity's sake—remember that what I say I mean to do; and do not, do not try to argue with me, afterwards."

At his words a change came over Alexandra. Her childlike artlessness appeared to leave her, and she became, in one breath of time, a woman, trained to submit and to obey.

"I'm waitin' to hear, Angel," she said, at last, with a little tremor in her voice.

But he was speechless.

Alexandra did not stir from where she stood, drooping, helpless, in the red light of the fire.

"Angell!" she said at last, and the word was an appeal—"Angell!"

It was hardly a happy coincidence that, when Lee lifted his averted eyes, they should alight upon the staggering text: "Thou God Seest Me". For weeks past the words had been a blinding accusation; but Alexandra became tearful whenever he proposed to take them down, so they had stayed. Now, the condemnation they conveyed was more than he could bear.

He shook his fist, in menace, at them, hardly knowing what he did; while his face grew stern and hard, and he broke into a stormy rush of words.

"I'm only doing this to please You, God!" he sobbed, in terrible agitation. "Do You hear what I say? Do You hear me, God Almighty?" he cried again. "I think You are putting upon me more than I ought to bear—I think You are!"

"What is it, Angel, darlin'?" faltered Alexandra.

"Well, God Almighty seems to think I am more than a man, was his unforeseen reply.

"What are you drivin' at?" she said, wearily.

"It is what I am trying to tell you—that I am going to leave you, and that you are going to leave me, and that we shall never see each other again."

She shook her head, and the tears began to trickle down her paling cheeks.

"Yes! It is no good you saying, 'No, it cannot be,'" he went on, with the same fierce, rapid utterance; and turning his back upon her grief. "It is no good, because I am going away to-night; and you must go to a friend of mine and stay there. We shall not see each other again. I meant to break it to you much more gently, and try to show you how we couldn't possibly go on living as we are; but now I can't explain, and I cannot help it if you think me brutal. You must obey, just because it is right. . . . And that is what I meant when I said, 'What I say, I will do'. I said that to show you I am not to be moved by any

argument — and do not, please, speak to me!"

"Angel!"

"Don't say anything," he pleaded, with piteous earnestness. "If I gave in now, it would have to come sooner or later, and we should have this dreadful hour all over again. Something in me tells me that it is so,—and I know it. Our sin is unpardonable, already; but to prolong it, now, when I know rightly what I have done and how unpardonable it is, would be infinitely worse."

"But, Angel ——"

"Do not speak, if you ever cared for me."

He leaned against the window, clutching at the sill to hold himself. His very lips were bloodless.

"Angel, don't you love me no more?"

To that appeal Lee beat the wall with his naked hand.

But Alexandra had no pity for his anguish, nor did she realise what suffering prompted those self-inflicted blows.

"Angel, do look at me," she sobbed, advancing a step.

"Oh! do not tempt me any more," he cried, then, with quivering mouth and still averted face.

"But, Angel ——"

"For Christ's sake be silent! I cannot bear it . . . I cannot bear it . . ."

"No! But look at me," she pleaded.

There was a new note of emotion in her voice! It roused a counter emotion in the man that made him faint and giddy. When he turned his troubled eyes upon her, she seemed to shimmer mistily before them. Tears still stood out on her pale cheeks and in her eyes; but a sad smile played about her transfigured mouth.

"God knows," began Lee, unsteadily advancing to take her in his arms, as he thought, for the last time in his life. "No! God does not know," he cried, bitterly, "how my heart is broken!"

"Oh! Angel," Alexandra whispered, pas-

sionately, her burning face against his breast. "You can't, can't, can't leave me now, not if Gawd 'Imself tells you to."

She had but one card left to play, but that one was her trump card; and she knew it. She had foreseen, from the beginning, that should her hand be forced, and she played this card, he would throw up the game, though every angel in heaven stood pledged to aid him in the unequal combat.

Lee tried twice, but vainly, to say the word "good-bye".

Alexandra raised her lovely face to his. There were tears on both.

"Then you are goin' to leave me?"

He nodded "Yes".

"But you can't leave my—our—your child," she returned, in a broken, thrilling whisper.

She felt his arms clasp, convulsively, about her.

Then, "My God!" she heard him gasp,

above her bended head. "What have we done?"

There was a lengthened silence, which neither seemed inclined to break. Then Alexandra, frightened at the oppressive stillness, fell suddenly to weeping. Her agitation served to sober his, at once.

"Why did you never tell me, darling?" he bent to ask her, in a sad, awed whisper.

"I was afraid," she sobbed.

"But you are sure?"

"Yes, yes; O! I wish I was dead! Are you goin' to leave me?"

"No, no, my darling! How could you think so?"

"You was so cruel 'ard, and said you would."

"But then it was different. I did not know. O! God, forgive us! God forgive me!"

"An' me," sobbed Alexandra.

"You cannot let this—this come to us and not be married now, dearest," he

pleaded, his face, all in one instant, illumined with new hope and tenderness. Alexandra rocked her slender body to and fro, in a fresh and stronger access of emotion, and Lee's countenance was suddenly bereft of hope and joy.

"Why are you so unlike every other woman in the world?" he asked, in sad despair.

"Why are you so unlike ev'ry other man?" she returned, sobbing angrily.

"You wrong many men," he answered, with great gentleness.

Alexandra struggled in his arms, trying to push him from her, but Lee drew her towards him, and approached the fire; sitting down before it, he took her on his knees, and laid her petulant, resisting head upon his shoulder, and gently stroked her hair.

"Well, you belong to me for ever and ever, now," he said, "and I care for you so much that I am glad there is this bond

between us. It is impossible for me to leave you, whether it would be right or wrong to do so. I am more glad than I ever thought I could be, either alive or dead."

Yet his eyes were filled with tears.

"You 'ates me, I know," came from Alexandra's mouth, against his shoulder, to the accompaniment of muffled sobs.

"No; you don't think that really, I know better. You know, too, how glad I am to keep you mine for always. But you know, too, that we ought to be properly and regularly married."

"I wish I was dead," wailed Alexandra. "I won't marry you, if you sends me away else. I won't, won't, won't marry you, nor no man,—I won't!"

"But why, dearest?"

"'Cause I won't—'cause I don't believe in it! I 'ates marriage and parsons and their jaws. O! I wish I was dead, I do, if you 'ates me so! I wish I was dead!"

And to every appeal or stern command of Lee's, both at that time and in the future, the girl, whatever was her mood, returned that most depressing and demoralising wail : "O! I wish I was dead, I do, if you 'ates me so!" and relapsed into a frame of mind compared with which even obstinacy might be accounted genial.

But a few minutes after she and Lee should have withdrawn, exhausted, from the contest, and the vain struggle (for lack of fighters) should have fallen through, leaving each unconvinced and unappreciative of the other's arguments — Alexandra would be laughing heartily at some sally of her own ; and, perhaps, constrained by her exhilarating humour, even Lee would break into a sombre smile.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BIRTH AND THE NAMING OF THE CHILD.

ALEXANDRA, in common with those natures of a like kaleidoscopic character, had no dominant trait. Even her obstinacy was invincible only on one point, while her selfishness was largely charged with sympathy. Lee's was one of the least complex natures in the world; but his virtues and his faults were as deeply rooted in him as an oak is in the ground.

Alexandra never suffered, though she pouted often, and wept more. It may be doubted whether the mental anguish Lee endured, at times, during the first twelve months of his and Alexandra's partnership, has been ever surpassed by souls outside of purgatory. More especially he suffered, being

a deeply religious man, at those times when his office and religion required him to present himself at the Holy Communion Table. He was not vicious, though his passions were far stronger than, during his lonely, early life, he had ever thought it possible that human passions could be.

This revelation, following the awakening of what had lain dormant in him for so many years, made him go about his daily work in inward fear and self-abasement ; but it added a divine grace of charity to all his ministrations, and tempered his rough zeal with an infinite, sad patience.

The affection Alexandra felt for Lee was an intangible sentiment, composed of many mixed ingredients, amongst which expediency, habit, respect, even, had due place. Lee worshipped Alexandra, although she was a roll of contradictions and emotions—often wayward. Her wilful stubbornness in refusing to perceive that marriage was a sacrament, and not alone a human ordinance, did

not, in his eyes, render her an unchaste woman. With such a one he might have fallen passionately in love, but he would never have regarded her with worship, or cherished her with rapture as his wife and as the mother of his child.

Many nights, when he could not sleep for the oppression of his sin (now to be carried to another generation), he would raise himself, and bending over Alexandra, sleeping like an infant by his side, would look into her lovely face—more childlike than ever in the deep unconsciousness of sleep—and watch her in a kind of sad, sacred veneration.

At such times, thought of her (whether passionate, despairing, or pitying) would deepen, unconsciously, into prayer for her. At morning and at evening, and again during those long night watches, he petitioned that all punishment, in the great hereafter, for their joint sin, might fall on him, alone, and that he might suffer Alexandra's part, as well as what was due to him.

The scripture reader, loving once, loved unto death. But Alexandra was ideally adapted to retain the love of a far less faithful man than Lee. She was never monotonous; appallingly fearless, both in thought and speech; and contrived, a thousand times a day, to prove, both how indispensable she was to Lee and how necessary he was to her. In theory, the union was as unequal as could be, but it worked well in practice.

The birth of the child, in the early autumn, accentuated Lee's perplexities. When Alexandra's hour of pain had passed, and he saw her white lips part, at sight of him, in the first smile of motherhood that they had ever worn, he, with his own pale lips on hers, was (though only filled with care for Alexandra's welfare) as near to Heaven as an immortal spirit, bound in the flesh, can ever be. A tiny, brownish head rested within Alexandra's arm, and Lee regarded it in utter awe.

Alexandra laughed softly, watching him with pleased eyes.

"It's a boy!" she whispered. "Ain't you glad? I am! Boys is better than gals, always!"

Then she slightly moved her arm, and told him, in another feeble whisper, to look at its "funny little face—not like any boy's or gal's". Lee looked, mistily, at the baby countenance; and then, without a word, he turned and went quickly out of the room.

For the moment, Alexandra thought his conduct cruel and unloverlike; but she was too tired and weak to ponder over it.

When Lee stepped softly back again to watch the mother and the child, he was grave and self-possessed, and rather white. Alexandra, herself, slept. Only the top of the little, brown head was visible above the bed-clothes; and it lay in the same place as before, just tucked inside its mother's arm. Then something stirred his heart that was not passion and not pity, but a blending of

the two; and in it was born a love, not only for his child, but also for its mother, incomparably purer, truer, deeper, and more eternal than his first great love for Alexandra.

The tiny, brown-haired baby drew Lee closer still to her, notwithstanding that she now displayed far more affection for the infant than for him. She had an uncommon gift of expressing feeling in many varied ways, and Lee was content with his own share. He worshipped at the baby's shrine as fervently as Alexandra, and with far more real tenderness. Motherhood increased her duties, but added not a tittle to her cares.

Lee's widened sympathies bore wondrous fruit among the sick and the helpless of St. Mark's. But his inward life was one long prayer for wife and child, so engrossing was his love for them, and so completely did they fill his thoughts.

But thought could not remove perplexity ;

and all Lee's prayers were powerless to make the crooked straight.

Alexandra frankly revelled in the baby; though she called Lee a "botherin' old granny," and pouted, when he besought her to be careful, for the sake of both. But other people also viewed the baby's advent with concern, and meditated, gravely, on its future.

The vicar and the curates of St. Mark's were among the first to congratulate the scripture reader on his fatherhood. But they let him plainly see that, while cordially disposed towards the Lee household, they viewed, with secret disapproval, this ill-considered increase in it.

Rentworth, the elder curate, was not yet married. He had a sanguine temperament, and believed that he could marry on his salary; but his lady love was one of the most unromantic souls alive, and stoutly held the contrary. He was inclined to regard Lee's domestic happiness almost as a personal grievance.

The younger curate was now formally engaged, and hoped to marry in about seven years' time. Meanwhile, he was filled with secret envy of the man who had been bold enough to wed on an income so inadequate.

The scripture reader's modest salary seemed hardly large enough to keep even one in comfort. But Alexandra's remarkable gift for housekeeping enabled three to live upon it, merrily, if not well. The smallness of Lee's means brought him but one real care. That was the haunting thought of Alexandra's and the baby's fate were he to die, or be laid upon a bed of sickness.

The daily round of duties, outside his home, chained Lee to an absorbing present. But when shut out from the outer world, and alone with Alexandra and his baby boy, he was apt to drive his thoughts into the future; not by preference (for the mental exercise was like that of a lame man feeling his way across a rocky, unknown country, in the

dark), but as a sacred duty owing to his child.

Alexandra had never thought in all her life. Had she been bidden to think on any subject under heaven, herself included, she could no more have done so, than she could have made a loaf without ingredients. When Lee grew saturated with gloom—as always happened after dipping into the hereafter, both temporal and eternal—she would twist her face into grimaces; or break out into shrill, ear-splitting song; or perch upon his knees and play breakdowns with her fingers on his face; or start the baby on a crawling expedition up his body.

This last device never failed to effect a diversion—often a violent one—in Lee's thoughts. He considered, and rightly so, that Alexandra was not sufficiently careful of their child.

But she remained impenitent, in spite of his rebukes. The child was not six weeks old, when, coming home one evening, Lee

found its mother tucking up its long clothes, and trying to make it stand on its absurd bits of feet. Lee flung himself upon her, with a muffled shout, and, rescuing the baby, so far forgot himself, in his agitation, as to shake its mother. She wept, bitterly ; but Lee turned his back on her imploring arms, and with stern, white face, he rocked the weeping infant off to sleep upon his breast.

When he next ventured to look her way, Alexandra was sobbing in a corner. Then he had to comfort her ; but Alexandra would not be comforted, or come out of the corner. He was obliged to put the baby in her arms, and take her up in his. She promised, tearfully, sniffing like the child she was, that she would "hold it good and never teach it to walk again until he said she might". But Lee preserved his grave demeanour, and sat down to eat the supper she had been keeping hot for him. She watched him eat it, with great tears in her eyes.

"You do set store on that kid," she said, noting how his attention travelled between the baby, now asleep on the bed, and herself.

"Because he is yours," said Lee, cheerfully, seeing her depression.

"If it were to die, I s'pose you'd feel real bad about it," faltered Alexandra, who could be gloomy, herself, when necessary.

"That reminds me," said Lee, firmly, "to tell you that the Sunday after next is Christening Sunday; and that I am determined not to put off baby's christening till next month."

They had had twenty quarrels, since the child's birth, upon this question—Alexandra appearing to object to baptism as much as to the marriage service.

She regarded Lee, with dismay, for some minutes after he had left off speaking, and then burst into tears.

This ready tearfulness of hers was Lee's

most trying adversary. Alexandra hardly knew how much he was affected by it. His face hardened, in proportion as his spirit waxed faint. If he had followed up his impulse, and acted according to his inclination, he would have gone over to the disconsolate, little heap of perversity and tears, upon the hearthrug, and taken her in his arms. All that he really did was to rap upon the table with the handle of a knife, and say, with sternness:—

“Alexandra, if you are going to cry all night, you had better go to bed”.

There came from the rug a tangled murmur of sobs, and—“your—supper—clear—’way”.

“O, I can clear away,” said Lee, suiting the action to the word. “You had really better go to bed.”

Alexandra did not move a finger; but checked her sobs to watch him clear the table with his old air of thorough use and habitude. When the room was set in order,

Lee drew a chair up, sharply, to the fire, and sat upon it.

There was a pause, and then he spoke.

"I've given way, wrongly, in other matters," he began, "but in this that concerns our child I will not give way. I intend he shall be baptised—and baptised he shall be—next Sunday week."

There was no reply from Alexandra, who edged further from Lee's chair and closer to the fire.

"You have got his outdoor clothes," Lee quietly went on, "and everything is ready but his name. We have not yet settled on the name, but we have nearly two weeks before us."

Still Alexandra said nothing.

"Shall we talk about his name, Alexandra dear?" said Lee, with assumed cheerfulness, and putting out his hand.

No reply.

"Alexandra!"

Silence.

"Alexandra! I am speaking to you!"

Still silence.

"Alexandra! I—I—you drive me too far!" His smouldering wrath burst into a flame. "By heavens!" he cried, trembling as much with anger as with agitation, "I tell you this! If you never speak another word to me as long as you live, I will carry that child myself to church and see it baptised—by force, if needs be."

Then Alexandra spoke, at last.

"I wish I was dead, I do," was what she said.

"You would have been long before this, if you had been wife or mate to some men!" retorted Lee, grimly.

"You'd better kill me," she sobbed, "if you hates me so. There is a poker in the fender, and I'd never tell no one."

Lee threw himself on the rug by her side, stirred by a variety of tumultuous emotions. His state of mind was indescribable.

"O, my girl!" he cried, bitterly, as soon as he could find his voice, "do you know that a child-woman like you could raise a man to heaven, and yet you try and drive one poor, wretched one to the mad-house or the gallows!"

"Am I very wicked?" sobbed Alexandra, on his shoulder.

"When you ask me to kill you, and offer our poker for that purpose, you are wicked and absurd."

She wept again.

"I wonder you puts your arm round me, I do," she said, at last. "I s'pose that's to show you're stronger than me, and are my master?"

"Partly that," he returned, outwardly unmoved as a statue, "and partly because I am really fond of you."

"If one o' them old curicks came in now, and seed us sittin' 'ere on the rug, you huggin' me and me lettin' you, they'd think we was bloomin' lunies," sobbed Alexandra, from

whose tender breast Lee's last words seemed to have removed some inward panic.

"For heaven's sake don't talk of the curates now!" Lee cried, both amused and shocked at her irrelevancy. "And how often have I told you not to use those dreadful words? Just think if baby learnt!"

"I can't do nothink right or proper," wailed Alexandra. "Not even carry my own baby to church to have it christened."

Lee's eyes glistened at this delicately announced surrender. His arm tightened round the girl, who leaned, with ostentatious helplessness, against him.

"You shall carry baby, darling, you know," he said, kissing her sad, tear-stained face.

"But you said I sh—sh—ou—ou—enn't and that you sh—ou—ou—ould."

"When I lose my temper I often say things I don't mean."

"But you said you intended baby to be took to church, and you was in a temper when you said it," said Alexandra, with affected candour. "Was that one of the things you meant, or didn't mean?"

"O!—I meant that."

She saw he did, and resigned herself to yield, with a dreary, little sigh. That question was disposed of, for good; but in the matter of the baby's name they could not come to an agreement.

The subject was brought up for discussion, on the following night, by Lee, who wished it settled. He was possessed with a passionate desire to have the child called after himself and Alexandra.

She, also, had set her heart on a particular name, but was most averse that he should know it.

Naturally, she set out to gain her point by the most roundabout way that was available; and severely tried Lee's patience by proposing, with an air of gravity, one prepos-

terous name upon another, without the least hope or wish that any of them should find favour in his eyes.

"You object to all my names, it seems," she finished, with provoking coolness. "Have you any to suggest?"

"I should like him to be called by a plain, unnoticeable name," said Lee.

"Why plain and unnoticeable, pray?"

"Because," Lee stammered, and his colour deepened, "he is—he is—you know the circumstances attendant on his birth—that is enough. I do not wish a name that would make everybody stare after him, and question."

There was an uncomfortable pause. Then —

"Have you thought of a name?" asked Alexandra, demurely.

"I should like one of his names to be Alexander," replied Lee, gravely.

Alexandra tittered.

"That's a very plain and unnoticeable

name—you're right there!" she said, with gentle irony.

"I meant for his second name. And I should like him to be called after me, Michael, for his first. Michael Alexander! and we could call him Michael."

"I hate Michael!" she replied.

"But, Alexandra dear ——"

"O! don't 'Alexandra dear' me so!"

"Well, we must have a plain name to call him by."

"Pooh!"

"You may say what you like, but ——"

"Well, I won't call him Michael,—not if you christens him nothink else!"

"I do not want to have him christened by any name you object to," said Lee, gloomily.

"We had better leave my name alone, and perhaps think of some plain, common name outside the family."

Alexandra's pulse beat quickly. She was secretly elated, but took care that what she felt should not appear upon the surface.

"Well, what?" she snapped, in reply to Lee's last dissatisfied suggestion. "You talk a lot, but you don't propose much."

"Should you like George?"

"Why George?" asked Alexandra, rather blankly.

"O!—I don't know. It's a plain English name, and very common. That was why I suggested it."

"Well, I hate George!"

"John?"

"I hate John!"

"H'm. What do you think of William?"

"Hate William!"

"You hate a great many names. Have you any likings?"

"N-n-no."

"But have you?"

"No."

"I believe you have, Alexandra! I believe you are angry because I won't let you

have one of those ridiculous names you first proposed."

"I ain't! Go on and think of some more names!"

"James—Jim!"

"O, Angel! I loathe James and Jim!"

"Well, you are hard to please! Edward?"

"Hate it."

"Charles?"

"H'm."

A ray of hope lit up Lee's despairing visage.

"Don't say you hate Charles, too, Alexandra!"

"It's not so bad as most, but——"

But Lee's patience was already overtaxed. "If you cannot make a choice, Alexandra," he said, decidedly, but not unkindly, "I shall have to do it. And, since we have both agreed on Alexander, and you do not hate Charles so bitterly as all the others, we will call our son Charles Alexander."

"Very well," said Alexandra, in a small, submissive voice.

"We can call him Charlie, you know, darling. That is simple and pretty too, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said, meekly. She had gained her point; and the child was christened by the names she wished.

CHAPTER IX.

"CHARLIE!"

LEE was lying awake, thinking over the past, in the middle of the night following that evening whose events have been chronicled in the last chapter. Thought, journeying over again the road he and Alexandra had travelled together, arrived, at last, at the milestone marked with his son's name. He repeated it, softly, to himself—"Charles Alexander".

The naming of the child brought home to him, with renewed vividness, that he, and he alone, had to answer for its immortal soul before God and men.

Suddenly, an alien thought broke in upon his musings, and struck him like a blow. It found him wholly unprepared, and left him

momentarily stunned. That thought was an unlooked-for recollection of the name he had heard Alexandra murmur, in her sleep, the first night she had slept in his house, when he had crept in to see that no harm had befallen her. He had heard her say "Charlie!"

To Lee, the thought that she (who held his whole heart) might still be thinking tenderly of her old lover, came as an overwhelming shock. His heart stopped beating in his body, and, for the time, his agitation held him in a vice, and he was unable to move or think or breathe.

The overmastering tumult in his soul dispersed all other feelings. Trembling in its throes, he turned to the sleeping woman by his side, and shook her, savagely. Then he struck a match, lighted the candle on the table by their bed, and turned again to Alexandra, who, struggling between sleep and wonder, rose to a sitting posture.

Amazement changed to terror when she

saw his face. Most mothers would have glanced, instinctively, towards the child, but she only stared, fearfully, at Lee.

"What is it?" she gasped. "Are you taken bad?"

"Yes," he replied, in a voice that was hardly audible. "But I want you to answer me; and speak the truth. O! speak the truth in this, as if it were the last words you will ever say."

His eyes, and the deep, hoarse earnestness of his voice, and her own incomprehension of its cause, made Alexandra speechless.

"Answer me truly," cried Lee, imploringly, "and remember that your face can't lie, and that if your words do, I shall find you out, and then the consequences will be more frightful than you or any man can think."

He paused to struggle with his agitation, but his silence was of short duration.

"Now, tell me," he went on, in low tones, full of pain, that thrilled even Alexandra,

"why, of all the names I chose for our boy, you only like Charlie—— Ah! my God!"

His cry was not unnatural. Alexandra had turned from white to red, and back again to a deathly pallor.

"Why do you take on so?" she faltered, shrinking back, and cowering beneath his terrorising gaze.

"Because your face has told me—has told me——" he could speak no further.

"You frightened me," she said, as usual breaking into tears. "What do you want me to say? I've never done you any harm, I haven't."

"I want you to tell me the truth," said Lee, striving to keep calm; "only the truth. Were you thinking of—of any one when you chose our boy's name?"

"D'ye mean any other man?" asked Alexandra, with a piteous sob. "Is that what you're driving at?"

"Yes. Do you not see what this means? I must tell you that I know more than you

think I do ; for I came in here the night you first slept here, and overheard you say a name in your sleep ; and it was— was——”

“Was it ‘Charlie’?” asked Alexandra, like a simple child.

“Yes ; for God’s sake don’t trifle with me ! You loved him then, and now you like his name only among all names. Do you know what I infer from that ?”

“Yes ; I like ’is name,” sobbed Alexandra, helplessly, wilfully blind to the true cause of Lee’s suspense ; “because I did love him onst, and he was my first, first love, and because he was that I’ve always liked his name ! I—I can’t ’elp it.”

“O ! But it is not that ! Can’t you, or won’t you see, Alexandra ?”

The suffering in his voice as he dwelt upon her name, though that name was uttered almost in a whisper, seemed to enlighten her.

“You’re not angry with me because I

can't 'elp liking his name, are you, Angel?" she faltered.

"It's not that," he groaned. "But, O! my girl, my girl! Don't you see you have not really forgotten him or put him out of your life?"

"I have," she cried, passionately, perceiving, all at once, the drift of his suspicions. "O! what wicked, untrue things you say of me!"

"Would to God it were untrue!" he cried, bitterly, in his turn. "I belong to you, heart and soul and body; but while you think tenderly of that man, your first lover—and I cannot help thinking still you do that—you cannot belong to me."

"I don't think of him," sobbed Alexandra. "I think of no one now but you—no one! O! you are cruel—cruel—cruel!"

He leaned across her and drew her fingers from her face. He had to use force to do it, but his hands were never more gentle, or his face more full of love and pain.

"Don't cry," he said, faintly; "and I do not want to be cruel. You don't know—you don't really know what this means to me. Since our child was born, and before, I thought you were my own love—my own, own love; and all the while it seems you are thinking of your first lover."

"O! you wicked, wicked story!" wailed Alexandra.

"But answer me truly, dear."

"You don't believe me!" burst out Alexandra, stormily. "I speak true as true, and you don't believe me. So what's the use?"

"I do believe you," Lee cried, with kindling eyes. "Only you speak so wildly. Tell me on your soul—on your child's soul—that you love me and only me, and that you never think of your first lover with affection—never regret him; and I will believe you."

"I love you and only you, and never thinks of my first lover, nor regrets 'im,"

repeated Alexandra, tearfully. "I swear it."

"Then it was not because you cared for him still,—the man you called Charlie,—that you wanted our boy to be Charlie too? Tell me that," he pleaded, "and I will believe you again."

"It wasn't because I cared for him. I don't! I hate him now. I've hated 'im ever since 'e left me and you took me home."

"Yet you changed colour when I spoke his name," he said, in sad reproach.

"Because you frightened me! You looked so fierce and awful, as if you'd kill me."

"Then you chose Charlie because out of all names you liked it best? Not because it was his and you still care for him, but because you had always been fond of it—was that it?"

"Yes," sniffed Alexandra, penitentially. "I couldn't help likin' it, but I hate him,

O! now you're taken bad, and what shall I do? What shall I do?"

"I—I am all right," he whispered, faintly. The reaction of relief after his dreadful doubt was such that, for the moment, he was unmanned. Alexandra piteously wrung her hands.

"Angel, darlin', look up," she cried, imploringly. "We won't call baby Charlie, if you don't like. O! Angel! O! he won't speak! O! won't anybody come?"

He strove to reassure her, and, with great effort, crushed the worst symptoms of his weakness.

"Why do you take on so and frighten me?" cried Alexandra, with a sad, scared face.

He kissed her quivering lips.

"I thought—it came so suddenly, too! —that you had perhaps cared for him all along," he said, in faltering tones, "and that I was only second with you, after all. And I—I love you so! My heart almost

broke, thinking you might, in your heart of hearts, be attached to him."

"I'm attached to no one but you," she said, still weeping; "you're wicked and cruel to begin thinking horrid things like that, all of a sudden, too! when you know you're my boy, my own, only boy!"

"Well, tell me so again," he pleaded, with dim eyes. "Tell me so again, and I will never think such thoughts again."

But Alexandra had still some business to transact. She only wept.

Remorse painted Lee's kindling face white again. "Alexandra, darling!" he cried "forgive me! I will never mistrust you again."

"I expect you do now," returned Alexandra, miserably. "We won't call our baby Charlie, else you'll be thinking I'm thinking of some one else,—you will."

His expressive face flushed with pain.

"I have told you I believe you," he said.

"I will not have you mistrust me like this. You wrong me now, and we have had enough of that. I trust you, perfectly."

"'E'd better not be called Charlie," wailed Alexandra, who was in one of her most exasperating moods, and knew it. "'Twill make you think unpleasant things. We'll call him Michael."

"We will call him Charlie, and nothing else!" cried Lee, passionately. "O! how can you thwart me like this?"

"'Ave it your way," sobbed Alexandra, in reply to this last outburst. "I'm only the weak one, and you're my master."

He winced.

"No! don't call me that," he cried. "I will give you a name to call me by, to-night, and do not—do not cry so, if you love me. Well, I want you to call me——; it is not true, in very truth and deed, but there is only God to hear beside myself, and I think He will forgive. Call me,"—he stammered, flushed, and then grew deathly pale,—“call

me, darling," he said, in a voice scarcely audible, "call me—husband."

Alexandra was never more acquiescent than when she had scored a point. She had won another victory in their last verbal tussle, anent the baby's name. She crept close to Lee, and whispered:

"Husband!"

Lee never ceased to pray that the time would one day come when he would have a right to bear that name; and when she would be his wife, in truth, as well as deed. At last his prayers would seem to have been granted. For, one fine winter's day, two or three months after the baby's christening, Alexandra, who had remained obdurate for about a year, said, *à propos* of nothing, that she would be married to Lee, after all, if it could be done in secret.

Lee was like a man who, having been cast headlong into hell, wakes up to find his torment but a dream. Only one who had suffered steadfastly and long could realise

what unimaginable joy was his, when he became assured that Alexandra really meant what she had said.

They were married before a registrar, in the Christmas week ; and no one but their two selves was the wiser, or ever knew that they had not been wedded a year before.

Lee, henceforward, went about his daily work (not with more zeal, for that had been impossible, nor with abatement of fear or of solicitude, for he knew the evil depths of others' hearts, from his knowledge of his own), but with a kindling sunshine in his breast and a great peace in his soul. Not that he ever ceased to mourn the past ; but in his sorrow there was, now, more penitence and less remorse. The thought of his great sin still haunted him ; and though peace and thankfulness now occupied the place of strife and bitterness, he never walked beyond the shadow of his fall.

Still, he became a different man, in more

ways than one, from the day of his and Alexandra's formal union. Henceforth, there was a note of almost sacred joy, as often as he said "my wife".

"Well," said Alexandra, with a demure sparkle, on the evening of the 27th, their actual wedding-day; "I hope you're content now, Mr. Lee."

"Yes," he replied, slowly, looking into her eyes, as though to read her inmost soul. "Yes, my wife; I am content."

CHAPTER X.

FLIP.

IT was early in the New Year, and Lee, who had left his wife in bed when he went out, was hurrying full speed, homewards, where his heart had been all the morning. His child had been ailing for some days, and Alexandra, herself, had a slight cold.

Lee, who was a far from strong man, treated his own occasional disorders in a stern, unyielding spirit; opposing them in dogged secrecy, or wholly disregarding them. But a cough from the child, or the least, most trivial complaint from Alexandra, filled him with anxiety and care.

Although Alexandra was the best of housewives, she had her lazy moods; and she enjoyed seeing Lee, in his brief inter-

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vals of leisure, turn to at housework, cooking, cleaning, and clearing up. He had an exceptionally quick temper, and, despite the happier circumstances of his married life, still suffered, intermittently, from gloom. But, in some respects, he was an ideal husband.

Alexandra, frequently, of late, stayed in bed for breakfast; and, occasionally, Lee found her so when he returned for dinner. Instead of smashing up the furniture—a practice all too common in St. Mark's—he, after assuring himself that his wife and child were well in health and spirits (Alexandra would sometimes reassure him on this latter point through the medium of her pillow), would cheerfully set to and prepare the meal, himself.

The scripture reader had been on a round of parochial visits, and was hastening home, in his peculiar jog-trot, down a street, when he came upon a sight that made the blood boil in his veins. A man

was standing in the waggon entrance of a railway yard, holding a bull terrier by the collar, with one hand, and, with the other, raining blow on blow upon its writhing body, with a leather strap.

He was a young fellow, broad and tall, of splendid figure, and had the dress of a better class mechanic; but his handsome features were convulsed with rage, and disfigured with insensate passion.

His onslaught on the dog was of so violent a nature as to show that he had wholly lost his self-control. Wincing under every blow, the poor brute twisted its maimed body round and round, but made no other sign of suffering.

The scripture reader feared no mortal man, and he rushed into the unequal contest, with clenched fists and flaming face.

"O! you brute!" was his first unorthodox rebuke. "Have done with that, or I will ——"

The threat broke off, abruptly, with a

warning shout, followed, almost instantaneously, by a hoarse scream of pain and terror. A goods van, having crossed, unheard, the yard within, rattled heavily out through the gateway, knocking off his feet the furious and unconscious figure in its path. There was a short, sharp scuffle, and another of those thrilling cries; and Lee saw the man whose brutality had so excited his anger, being, one moment, trampled under the hoofs of the off horse, and the next, lying white and, apparently, lifeless, in the roadway.

A crowd seemed to spring up from under Lee's very feet, at the same instant that the police arrived upon the scene, to hold animated converse with the driver of the van.

But the scripture reader was tacitly regarded as the only fit and proper person to take charge of the injured man. Indeed, one bystander more than hinted that he considered Lee to have been the

cause of the catastrophe, and that he ought, on that account, "to be made to look arter him like a brother".

This worthy fellow had been enjoying the bull terrier's torture before Lee came on the scene, and, naturally, had resented the scripture reader's interference. In fact, he was already giving vent to that resentment (by the abruptly-expressed opinion, studded with many oaths, "that all blokes 'oo interfered 'twixt master and dorg deserved a thunderin' good bashin'") when the accident occurred, and changed the edifying current of his thoughts.

Five minutes later, Lee, driving rapidly towards the nearest hospital, found himself holding tenderly the head of one for whom, but just before, he had experienced a sentiment of anger and disgust.

He left his charge, insensible and badly injured in one foot and side, in hospital hands; and, since suffering appealed to him more strongly than did any other human

attribute, asked and received permission to call again, later in the day.

The young man's white, set face, as it rested on his arm, stirred up, within him, curious emotions of pity and regret. With the disfiguring passion gone from it, that face had much in it that was attractive, and almost beautiful. It fastened itself upon Lee's memory, and stayed there, until he came back to the hospital and found it lying on the pillows, pale still, but no longer with a look of suffering, its owner one of ten pathetic figures arranged along the wall.

The pathos of the particular bed of suffering to which Lee drew near, was quickly blotted out by an abrupt remembrance of the writhing, quivering body of the dog; and the scripture reader shook off his sentimentality. The injured man, whose name, he found, was Cunliffe, regarded him with pleasure, in which was mixed both wonder and inquiry; and, so soon as Lee sat down by his bed, impulsively put out his hand.

"You do not know me," said Lee, gravely. "But I was just coming up to knock you down for ill-treating your dog, when the van did it instead."

The other shot an inquiring glance at Lee from under his soft lashes; they were as thick and long and curling as a woman's. Meeting Lee's cold glance, he dropped them, and sank back on his pillow, with an abashed air.

The extravagance of Lee's remark, considering their respective size, did not appear to strike either. This was the advantageous effect of earnestness displayed in a good cause.

"Where is your dog, by the way?" asked Lee, by way of breaking a depressing silence.

Cunliffe struggled with a coming fit of risibility, and replied, unsteadily:

"In—in the yard, chained up outside the outpatients' waiting-room—the terror of the whole blooming staff!"

"How on earth do you know?" asked Lee, in wonder.

"He followed me in here," was the reply, with a broken titter, followed, immediately, by an apologetic look, "and wriggled in between the doctor's legs. D'you know, they had to beat the old rip off my body before they could get to me! If I'd only been able to give the word, he'd have chewed 'em all up."

"Who? The doctors? I am glad, knowing what I know, that you were insensible," said Lee, with cutting emphasis.

"H'm. . . . Then he carried on so when he saw 'em bringing their instruments and bandages and things, tore around and frightened the women into fits, that they got a porter in who understands dogs, and he got him out, after a tussle. I say! I should like to see that porter."

"Why?"

"'Cause he might be inclined to look after my dog till I'm well again. Can't

keep him howling outside in the yard, you know. D'you think that porter would look after him for awhile?"

"I cannot say," replied Lee, in his most frigid accents, still haunted by the brutal scene outside the hospital, "but I think it most improbable."

There was another gloomy silence.

"And it was this devoted animal whom you were doing your best to beat to death!" burst out the scripture reader, at last, with kindling eyes. "Why, I would not have the most abandoned ruffian treated as you treated that poor, dumb, loving, inoffensive beast."

The other's handsome mouth hardened, but his eyes were full of genuine remorse. Lee noticed the contradictory expression, and wondered which gave the correct index to his feelings.

"He's my dog," was his low reply, "and he disobeyed me. I've a right to give it him hot, and I did!"

But he spoke doubtfully, and in his tone was more than a suspicion of regret.

"Disobeyed you!" echoed Lee. "He should have half killed a child, at least, to warrant a tithe of such a punishment. How d'you mean disobeyed?"

"Well . . . I forget," muttered Cunliffe, with an uneasy wriggle. There was something in the scripture reader's eye that cowed men into penitence, and forced them to respect his motives. They never dreamed of resenting, from him, interference in their personal concerns which, from another, less earnest and less single-minded, they would have deemed impertinent.

"That is absurd!" he replied, sharply, to Cunliffe's last questionable statement.

"Well, . . . it was—a rat, if you must know. I told him to go for it—or else I told him not to, and he disobeyed, one way or the other. I do forget which way," was the sulkily reluctant answer.

"A rat!" ejaculated Lee; and then there was yet another dreary silence.

"I can't help it," murmured the prostrate man, at last, with something very like a sob.

"Being a brute, do you mean?" retorted Lee. "Cain might just as well have said, 'I can't help being a murderer'."

"Well, and p'raps he might! And, if you've not felt it, you've no right to condemn him or any other man."

"God forbid I should condemn any man!" cried the scripture reader, turning as white as the sheet on which his hand was resting. Cunliffe peered at him in his earnest, scrutinising way, from under his long lashes.

"I'll tell you what it is that trips me up," he said, at last, with a rueful smile. "It's my cursed temper."

Lee had regained his self-control with this ingenuous confession. "That's bad," was all he said, gravely.

The ice now broken, Cunliffe seemed disposed to be communicative.

"When it grips me I'm not myself any longer, I'm a devil," he declared, with dreary resignation ; "I don't know what I'm doing, but I don't want to know. Then I can't stop. D'you know I couldn't have stopped beating that dog then, if God Himself had come up to stop me."

He spoke without the slightest emphasis, and with no more agitation than if his subject were the state of the barometer ; but his voice was bitter, and his eyes stormy and sad.

The scripture reader was shocked at his seeming unconcern, but full of pity for his undoubted distress.

"When—when do these awful fits attack you?" he inquired, in some dismay.

"O!—when—when I'm thwarted."

"About a rat?"

"Well, I can't help it," returned Cunliffe, doggedly. "I was whistling to that dog as kind and loving as you would, and

he thwarted me ; and I got all bloody, all on fire. I can't help it."

"But, you know, you are forewarned," sighed Lee, impatiently ; "so you can determine not to let yourself get thwarted."

"I might determine till I'm black in the face ; 'twould make no difference when things went contrary," was the depressing answer.

"To your own will, you mean," said Lee, severely. "But that is a fault that can be conquered, and if you overcome that, the occasions for your diabolical outbursts will not arise."

"It sounds blooming easy when you preach," said the disconsolate Cunliffe, "but it won't work."

"Believe me it will," said Lee, earnestly, in a voice that trembled with his thoughts. He rose, having outstayed his time, and seemed to tower, like a reproachful vision, over the prostrate man.

"I know, I know from experience," he

went on ; "I have been the greatest of sinners, myself, and my temper has led me astray many, many times, that I tremble to think of now ; and let me tell you this, you vent yours on your dog now, but if you do not restrain it—O ! I tell you, I warn you in all pity and affection, believe me !—you will vent it some day on a human creature, and perhaps one you love ! And since you are so diabolically possessed in your rage, you yourself may come to be branded as a murderer of your own flesh and blood—your own—— O ! what have I done ?"

His impressive warning broke off, abruptly, with a cry of dismay. He beckoned, wildly, and with extreme agitation, to a nurse, standing by another bed. Cunliffe had fainted, and the look on his white face would have made a far harder heart, than had the scripture reader, bleed with pity.

Lee was precipitately driven from the ward, in spite of his appeals to be allowed

to stay. A few minutes later, a nurse came into the hall where he was waiting, miserably aware that his unbridled zeal had been the cause of the sick man's collapse; and reassured him as to his "friend's" condition. He had recovered from his fainting fit, but was to be kept quiet for the remainder of the day.

"Would you do this for me?" said Lee, eagerly, as a sudden thought occurred to him. "Will you, please, just tell him I will take his dog home with me, if he likes, and take care of it, until he is well. Will you ask him whether he would like that?"

The nurse was acquiescent, and Lee waited. After a little while, she returned, with instructions for that porter who "understood dogs," to unloose the bull terrier and deliver it to Lee.

"Didn't he say anything?" asked Lee, weakly disappointed at receiving no message from the dog's master, towards whom he felt unreasonably drawn,

"Say anything!" retorted the nurse. 'No! *You've* upset him so, that he's not 'able to say anything! I told him what you were going to do, and I suppose he heard. Anyhow, the dog's got to go. As for your friend, he's crying like a girl, under the bed-clothes. And it's *your* doing! You'd better be careful if you're allowed in to-morrow! We don't like our patients upset!"

Having given him this trenchant warning and rebuke, she left him, with an air of some importance. And Lee went home, with the bull terrier (perfectly docile in his hands), crushed in soul.

The picture of Cunliffe, with his boyish eyes, his childlike hopelessness about his own infirmity, and his long, manly figure, now laid low, crying like a girl, beneath the bed-clothes, haunted him, and transformed his sentiments towards the original into a something nearly akin to love.

Alexandra heard the story with an edify-

ing interest. The animal's collar was labelled "Flip Cunliffe," with an address that, presumably, was Cunliffe's.

"What a curious name Flip is for a man!" remarked Lee.

Alexandra made no reply, at first. She was fondling the dog, who submitted to her tantalising caresses with a praiseworthy endurance. Suddenly, she said, in a quick, breathless voice :

"O, Angel! I wish you'd look at baby! He looks so awfully queer!"

Lee bent over the sleeping baby, in alarm. But his expression soon relaxed, and settled into one of puzzled relief, after a long, deep scrutiny.

"He's flushed a little, but he looks all right, Alexandra."

"Well, he did look queer a while ago," protested Alexandra, crossly. "He gave me quite a turn."

Lee started.

"Why, yes," he said, "you do look

scared, my darling! Why, you foolish, little thing! I believe you have frightened yourself to death. And your hands are quite cold."

Alexandra, who seemed genuinely upset, would not have been consistent had she not wept at this manifestation of her husband's love. She was depressed, for some time after, and only brightened up when the bull terrier awoke from a dream of rats on the hearthrug, at the appetising smell of supper.

"Come here, Flip, and let's see whether you can beg for your supper," she said, selecting a choice morsel from her plate, and holding it out, some feet above the ground.

"Why do you call him by his master's name?" laughed Lee.

"Guess it's his name," retorted Alexandra, with a superior toss of her head. "Flip on the collar, that's his name; then Cunliffe, that's the master's; and then the address o' both. Don't you see, silly?"

"Well, I hear you, but I am not altogether convinced. Put that fat down, and just say 'Flip,' in a quiet voice, and see whether he'll come. He hasn't stirred yet."

"He's been yawnin'."

Alexandra dropped the piece of fat, selected, by her, for friendship's offering, and said, in a gentle, dreamy voice:

"Flip!"

The bull terrier arose, shook himself, and came over to her side.

"Flip!" said Lee, quietly.

The animal pricked up its ears, trotted round Alexandra's chair, and rested its black muzzle on Lee's knee; its honest eyes beamed with delight and friendliness.

"Well, you are very clever to guess that was his name," said Lee, with an affectionate smile across the table. "There is no sign between Flip and Cunliffe, and I thought it was all one name—the short for Philip, perhaps."

"Does he look a Philip, Angel?"

"I do not know how you consider a Philip should look," said Lee, laughing again. "He is very good-looking."

"As handsome as you, Angel?"

"You know I am not at all handsome," Lee said to that, with a grim smile, yet secretly pleased at Alexandra's innocently implied flattery.

"I think you're lovely," replied his wife.

Lee laughed outright. Alexandra was singularly amiable and agreeable throughout the meal. That was, perhaps, the happiest evening that Lee yet had spent, since she came into his simple life, and filled it with perplexities, complex entanglements, and hidden snares.

CHAPTER XI.

"AHKEE."

ALEXANDRA'S character was far from simple, and no ordinary one. Her husband, who had blindly fallen in love with her, at first sight, was a far more fervent, more passionate lover at the end, than at the beginning of their year of intimacy. Her complex nature was flecked with a thousand tiny flaws, and Lee was sufficiently clear-minded to perceive them all; too simple to realise that many glaring, little faults can conceal great vices, as well as a multitude of virtues; but man-like enough to love her all the more for her very human weaknesses.

Alexandra's virtue was all on the surface, and she had the gift of making it appear illimitable. All that was good in her Lee

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magnified, in proportion as he doubted his own worth (and his fall had made him, who had been always modest, exquisitely humble); until her virtue shone as burnished gold by the side of that baser metal of his own.

Thus, after the birth of the child, he regarded her with tender adoration, as one who had endured the cross of motherhood that he might wear the crown of fatherhood. This was, perhaps, an exaggerated view to take, but he held to it, in all sincerity. He looked on Alexandra as one liable to err in many little ways, and, therefore, to be cherished the more ardently. Yet, above and beyond all that, he worshipped her as the one and only being who could raise his soul from the gross animalism, in which, in his great penitence, he believed it to be sunk.

That Alexandra had been the obdurate one, throughout, was nothing in his eyes. He believed that she had acted as she had,

simply and solely through religious ignorance and want of faith.

At the time that a new inmate, in Flip's person, came to dwell beneath Lee's roof (there were now two small rooms instead of one), the home life of the scripture reader of St. Mark's had reached a height of happiness he would have deemed impossible, in his old, lonely days. Alexandra's presence illumined the dreariest hours of failure in his missionary work, without; while the baby, now a short-frocked, dimpled, blue-eyed thing, was an eternal wonder and delight.

This tiny life brought perfect joy to Lee. When the baby was first capable of reasonable action, it stretched out its arms to him. And very soon he noticed, with a thrill, that when he took it from its mother's arms into his own, it smiled up in his face. Its rose-leaf countenance was a replica in miniature of Alexandra's, allowing for its immaturity. Lee turned away his head, as tears, in spite

of all his efforts, welled out beneath his blinking lashes. Out of his care and tenderness, there sprang such love for the child as made his slightest action in its service (and they were many, for his girl-wife was an indifferent nurse) a sacred and enduring privilege, for which he never ceased to thank his God.

Flip and the baby became friends and lovers at first sight. The child took all the liberties. Flip was a big, brindled bull terrier, and as mild as a lamb until rats were introduced into the conversation.

Alexandra, to test him or to tease him, set him, once, to guard the baby. She then retired outside, and, with inimitable skill, imitated the whistle of attack, the shriek of a rat at bay, and the final scuffle that precedes the death. Flip was quivering from head to foot when she put her head in through the doorway, and his eye-balls shot fire. But he had not stirred an inch.

For another test, or else to tease her husband, she put the baby on the bed, in his absence, and cautioned Flip that no one but herself must touch it. Soon afterwards, Lee returned; and Alexandra, who was frying sausages for supper, said, without turning from her occupation, and with a little note of malice in her voice:

"Angel, Flip's not goin' to let you touch baby. He thinks you handle him too roughly."

Lee was deaf to the tone, but not indifferent to the slur implied. He flushed, and went hastily towards the bed. Flip's muffled growl was a whole chapter of condensed, savage warning.

"Take care! he'll bite! I know him well!" cried Alexandra, with sparkling eyes, and in a tremor of excitement and delight. "He don't growl like that without meanin' business, Angel!"

Lee's reply was a passionate movement to take up his child. Flip literally flung

himself upon the bed between the two, his great body rising like a tower between the baby and the man.

"Alexandra, call off the dog this instant!" said Lee; and only his steadfast habit kept him from an oath.

Alexandra was immeasurably proud of the successful issue of her trick; but Lee's white, savage face, and harsh voice warned her to desist from further irritation. Having had her little triumph, she whistled to Flip; and that sagacious animal retired from guard, looking askance at Lee, while creeping towards her feet. Alexandra laughed.

"Why, what a foolish old wooden head you are, to make such a fuss, Angel!" she remarked.

A sharp retort was on Lee's tongue, and his eyes blazed with fire. But he checked his passionate rejoinder, with an effort, and, taking up his sleeping child—with such tenderness and admirable cleverness that it

never stirred an eyelash, in its sleep—sat down some distance from his wife and her supporter, not trusting himself to speak. At last, he said :

“I don’t like these jokes, Alexandra. They are not right, for one thing, because you delude the dog by them. How is he to reason out anything? He only knows he is to obey ; and when you tell him not to let me touch my child, you are acting unfairly by him and me—especially me.”

“What a fuss about a silly, little trick!” was all she said, with lofty contempt.

“It is a silly trick,” replied Lee, coldly. “But I object to it, and I tell you not to do it again.”

Alexandra merely grunted.

His child was ever present in Lee’s mind. He dwelt on it with all the tender rapture of a mother. Charlie’s eyes were like blue flowers, in whose dewy depths one star plays hide and seek with another. Alexandra’s were blue, too, and had the same

enchancing starlights. His head was covered with a pale, brown down, that Lee was never tired of stroking, it was so soft and satiny.

Alexandra, who would have talked to the furniture had she been without an auditor, chattered all day to him, when Lee was absent. And Lee confided to him all his hopes and aspirations on his infantile behalf, and addressed to him a thousand endearing jests and fancies, between his rising and retiring.

And thus it came to pass that, at an extremely early age, Charlie evinced a strong desire to clothe his thoughts with words, and, to that end, would twist his face into inimitable shapes. He had a fascinating habit of wrinkling up his nose, in reply to Lee's exalted periods, and expressed assent by pantomimic action that was partly sneeze and partly laughter.

Dissent he showed in various ways, but rarely by tears. Sometimes it took the form

of an impetuous assault upon his elders, with all his arms and legs. Sometimes he frowned, terrifically. Occasionally, he bel-lowed, with stentorian voice and brilliantly unclouded eyes. But his rage was quickly over, and his face would break up, in one flash, from an image of offended wrath, into a mirror of enchanting smiles.

Lee would look grave at these displays of temper, and miserably convict himself as the one to blame. All that was sweet and charming in the child he credited to Alexandra. He tried to teach the baby that these outbreaks should be followed by peni-tence and sorrow, and succeeded in inducing him to sue for pardon with a kiss; though it was doubtful whether the motive of the action ever entered into Charlie's scheme.

His method of imparting kisses was unique. He would browse, gently, with his baby lips, over the face of the kissee, mur-muring, the while, the soft refrain "*Ahkee, Ahkee, Ahkee,*"—laying stress on the final

syllable. And this special prattle rarely left his lips unless he was asleep.

Long before most babies dream of leaving their nurses' arms, he began to crawl about the floor; and Lee, returning from his work, would hear him buzzing, like some persistent bee, in every corner of the room. He only had to show himself within the doorway for "*Ahkee*" to break into an excited tangle of shouts, and crows, and laughter. And sometimes Charlie (nicknamed Ahkee) got furious with his absurd arms and legs, because they could not take him fast enough to the beloved object in the doorway.

Lee, more often than not, went down upon his knees to meet him; and once the Reverend Mr. Woolcombe found him lying on his back, on the floor, with Ahkee rolling over him, convulsed with laughter.

Speaking of this incident to his wife, as a proof of how completely we may all be led astray in our conceptions of another's character, even after long and intimate

acquaintance, Woolcombe asserted that, at first, he doubted the evidence of his own senses; and next—when he had found them trustworthy—Lee's sanity.

"I found, however," he went on, in his formal way, "that both my doubts were founded on false premises; and that our conception of our scripture reader's nature has been wholly wrong. He, who was thought to be the most confirmed misogynist in all the parish, turns out to be a model of domestic virtues."

Lee made many plans for his small son's future, never doubting that the child would have a future. Therefore, when sudden illness overtook that joyous life, he was, at first, benumbed, and then plunged into a frightful dread, the more overwhelming because of his first immunity from fear. Quickly as Ahkee sickened, he seemed, to Lee's distracted eyes, to be drifting towards the tideless seas of Death with a still more terrible swiftness.

"And I cannot hold him back!" he cried, to Alexandra, "though I would give up everything but you to keep him. Do you think it is because of our first sin? Do you think we are going to be punished through our child?"

Alexandra shook her head, convulsively. Now the Angel of Death was hovering over their house, she had become a white-faced, wild-eyed ghost. Suspense, of quite another kind than that connected with her boy, was also now tormenting her; but this her husband neither knew nor shared.

"Do you think God is going to take our darling from us because He thinks I am not fit to have him? Oh! do answer me, Alexandra," Lee would cry, imploringly, he kneeling by the bed and Alexandra sitting at his side, and both watching the child, who was either sunk in a heavy stupor, or moaning, piteously, in burning fever.

"I—don't—know," she would mutter, casting frightened glances over her shoulder.

"But you might say what you think, darling," he insisted, once.

"But I *don't* know," wailed Alexandra. "And sayin' don't make things be or not be. If God wants to take him He will take him. O! O! O!"

"Let us pray," said Lee, controlling his own grief when he saw how Alexandra shook, until her tender body seemed nearly torn asunder. "God Almighty knows how bitterly we have repented of our sin. Perhaps He will let us keep him if we pray. Pray with me, Alexandra."

"Prayin' don't make things come right," was Alexandra's sobbing answer. "It's doin' right that does it! You've prayed a great deal since you first saw me!"

But Lee did not hear her. He was offering up himself, his life, his whole life's service, in exchange for the tiny life of his baby son. He had long ago, with tears and prayers and stern resolve, confirmed by sterner sacrifice, tried to

root out his hasty temper and his baser passions.

It seemed as though the Powers above would not accept his service on the terms he offered. Ahkee shrunk into a pallid, little image; the dimples and the creases faded, slowly, from his once round arms and legs; and Lee could have spanned his wasted neck with one finger and his thumb.

The fever smouldered and burnt out, at last, but the bark that carried Ahkee's tiny life seemed to have slipped its cable for all time. Alexandra's state of mind, those weary days, was one of blank, despairing misery. She ate little, and said nothing at all. Lee went about his work with sunken eyes, in which despair battled fiercely with tortured hope. And Ahkee drifted slowly down the stream.

At the beginning of the child's illness, Lee's parish duties were thrown to the four winds of heaven, and the curates were reduced to frenzy, in trying to pick up the scattered

shreds. All of a sudden, the man perceived how tremendous a thing he was asking from Heaven; and became aware that, while offering his life's service in his Master's work, he was, at the same time, withholding it.

So he went back humbly to his work; consoled the sick in soul and body; rebuked backsliders; warned the guilty; brought food and clothing and the Gospel into a hundred homes that needed all three, badly; searched for the lost sheep; struck terror into the black ones; and in his single, zealous person, did five men's work between the rising and the setting sun.

Everywhere he went, his baby's piteous, pale face went with him; and there was that in his own countenance that made men shrink from offering hope or consolation.

Meanwhile, he had not forgotten Cunliffe. By nature reserved to outsiders, Lee was reticent concerning his home life. His domestic happiness seemed, to him, to be

an inappropriate subject for conversation between himself and Cunliffe, who, by his own account, was a man without home ties. But, when Ahkee fell sick, the barrier of reserve was broken down; and Cunliffe, in sympathy and awe, listened while Lee poured forth his heart to him.

"How old is he?" he asked, on one occasion, vaguely wondering why he had always thought the scripture reader an unmarried man, and Flip the comrade of a bachelor's household.

"Nearly ten months, but 'cute as few are at twenty!" cried Lee, eagerly. "You should see him, Cunliffe, try to talk to me when I've got him on my arm—O! my little child!"

There was a moment's silence, in which Cunliffe reached for Lee's hand, grasped it, and held it tightly. He felt the scripture reader shaking, and held on.

"Tell me about him, what's he like!" Cunliffe pursued, more for Lee's sake, and

to divert him from dwelling on the dread to-morrow, than from any strong desire for the information.

"He's little and round—I mean he was—and ever so quick, like a squirrel," replied Lee, in a low voice. "And he was always wrinkling up his face with laughing—O! I—I cannot tell you any more."

He faltered, choked, and finally laid his face upon the bed. Cunliffe gripped his hand harder, but said nothing. There were tears in his blue eyes, too.

"Do come again to-morrow," he said, affectionately, when Lee rose to go. "Do come and tell me how your little boy is."

Lee promised, and fulfilled that promise to the letter. But Ahkee was no better on the morrow.

"D'you say Flip won't leave the bedside, and growls at the doctor?" whispered Flip's tender master, in gentle accents, and with saddened eyes. "How he must have taken to the little chap! He couldn't do more

for me, and he loves me that well he'd die for me."

Then, all at once, the exultant glow departed from his face, and left it white and wan, and filled with dreary despair.

"Don't take on," he said to Lee. "Things isn't so bad with you they can't be better."

"They're bad enough," was the heart-broken reply. "Bad as bad can be, the doctor says. And what's bad, too, is that I cannot, cannot think of anything else, night or day, even in my prayers! Whenever I pray I see his face, his little white face; and it is so full of pain, and he has done no wrong! O! why should he suffer? I am the one who ought to suffer."

"Well—don't take on," faltered Cunliffe, again. "Look here! Shall I tell you a story to take your mind off it?"

There was something so frank and unaffected in the young man's childishness, that Lee could not forbear to smile, in spite of his own trouble.

"It's a sad story what I'm going to tell you," went on Cunliffe, in a voice he tried, in vain, to make indifferent. "About a pal of mine — Are you listening?"

Lee turned a lustreless eye upon the would-be story-teller. It was sadly lacking in interest; but its owner nodded, wearily.

"Well, this fellow, like me, had a devil of a temper." Cunliffe's subterfuge was so transparent that to any less preoccupied than Lee, the voice, alone, would have betrayed it. "And he couldn't control it when the test time came—when he got put out, and all that—though he might make a million good resolves. And he married a girl he loved—O! he loved her with all his heart and soul!— Are you listening?"

Lee started and turned, dismayed at the voice; and his dismay was not lessened at the sight of the white, working face that confronted him.

"Go on," he answered, faintly. "I am listening."

"And they hadn't been married but a very few weeks," continued Cunliffe, with painfully increasing effort, "when the girl, his wife, thwarted him—thwarted him badly; and all in one rush those hell fires flared up in him, and he went mad, and went for her. My God! how she screeched!"

"Do not tell me any more," said Lee.

"I must. O! do hear me! It's the first time I've spoken to a living soul, and it seems to tear my heart open"—his voice broke upon a tearless sob—"I'll keep quiet; and won't cry or make a fuss—do hear me out," he pleaded.

His heaving chest was piteous to see. So also was the anguish in his wild, dry eyes. Lee looked, but could say nothing.

"Well, she got away. She was quicker than lightning, or he'd have killed her on the spot.—Yes! I know you know *who*; only I tell it easier, saying 'him' instead

of 'me'!—And he followed, blind and mad with rage."

Lee groaned.

"And he heard her sobbing out, 'The river!' And he followed her, but she was quicker than him, and he lost her in one of those long, dark streets, and never, never found her! Do you think she is in the river?"

"I cannot tell," replied Lee, shocked and heavy-hearted. "But I should not think so—indeed, I should not."

His heart bled with pity. There was so much of misery in the man's last pleading question.

"Then what's got to her? Can you tell me that, if you shouldn't think this and that?" returned the other, fiercely. "For she's never come home to me, never; and you don't know how long I've waited! Where would she be all these months and months and months?"

"But you are not only waiting, are you? Have you looked for her?"

"Looked for her? No one but me 'll ever know how many hundred miles of London streets. I've walked, looking for my lost darling."

"Well, try to keep calm," said Lee, now visibly affected. "You must have driven her half crazy with fright, poor thing, and that is why she does not come home. I do not think you realise how awful are these outbursts."

"But she knows I loved her true," said Cunliffe, with a sullen moan, as though a naked nerve were touched. "And she loved me true back—she said she did, scores and scores of times."

"Well, she will be all the more ready to come back when you do find her," cried Lee, with simulated cheerfulness.

"But why don't she come back?" groaned Cunliffe, clinging, doggedly, to his despair. "She knows I get over my tempers— even the worst ones"

"I daresay you frightened her badly," suggested Lee, reassuringly.

"I haven't told you the worst, I'm afraid," said Cunliffe, in a lower voice.

"What! Worse?"

"Well, it's this—talking of frightening her—p'r'aps it's why she won't come back. I was calling after her that if she ever came home, next week, day, year, or ever, I'd—kill her—if I waited a thousand years."

"You said all that? O! how could you?"

"I didn't mean it! O! I didn't mean it! It was my devil's rage! But she might have known I didn't mean it!"

"Well, do try to be calm! Haven't you inquired after her friends, or at her old home?"

"You wouldn't ask if you knew the lot they were," said Cunliffe, with a little, miserable laugh. "But I did go round to her home, and I got—blasphemy!" Lee shuddered. "And they knew nothing, I saw

that. I've been again, and I see they know nothing, still. Shall I tell you what I think?"

"If it makes you easier. But it only seems to upset you, not to comfort you, to talk about it."

"Well, let me talk, anyway! I tell you I shall go mad or my heart will burst outright, if I don't talk of it, now I've told you so far."

"Well, tell me, then, what you think, and try to control yourself."

"I think she must have jumped clean into the river in her fright—poor, pretty darling!"

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Lee, as much dismayed at Cunliffe's state of mind, as at his gloomy statement of belief.

"Else she'd have come home to me long afore this, would my girl. She was that alone, and almost penniless! And she wouldn't have the heart to live and make her way alone, like some."

"Poor fellow! Don't cry so terribly!

I do not think she could have gone to the river. Only the utterly lost do that. And she must have remembered, sooner or later, that it was not you—that you were not yourself—when you threatened her.”

“I’ve tried to think that as I’ve walked those streets, and I put a bit of candle in the window when all was dark, thinking she might—might have crept back. And something in me mocks me all the time for a fool.”

“Well, don’t give up looking, Cunliffe,” said Lee, unsteadily. “And, when you get about again, I’ll join you too. You scared her terribly, I suspect, and she’s lying low, perhaps, meaning to punish you.”

“You don’t know my wife,” was the comfortless reply. “She was not the girl to lie low and shift for herself, on twopence farthing—and I guess she hadn’t more than that about her when she ran away. No! the river’s got her, or I’d have heard or seen something of her before this!—And

yet—why did I still put that light in my windows, and walk and walk when work's done—if I think so?" he faltered, shooting a sad, puzzled glance at Lee.

"Because you don't think so really! Because your heart is wiser than yourself, and refuses to give up hope!" cried Lee, wringing his friend's hand.

"D'you know—I can tell you what I couldn't no other man—d'you know, there was more than her? That's what breaks my heart now, every time I think of it."

"What do you mean?" inquired the other, all adrift.

"There would be a child, too."

"A child?"

"Not then," he faltered; "but she—she was like that, and knew it, for she told me. D'you think she could have jumped into the river with that?"

"No! no!"

"Then it would be born now, and I—

I've never seen it! And I think my heart will break! but it serves me right!"

"Poor fellow! Poor, poor girl, too!"

"Now you know what I am—either murderer of my wife and my baby that wasn't born, or else I'm letting them beg their bread from strangers, and me living in comfort and plenty—for I'm well off for my station. Just think of those long, cold, winter nights! She wasn't strong; and a tiny baby! If I could be punished for it, p'raps I'd feel better. But they suffer!"

Lee drew a long breath that ended in a groan. It was as though he had just awakened out of a long and painful dream, and, in the awakening, had remembered with what bitter suspense his own immediate future was surrounded.

"I must go back to my little boy now," he said; "but I will come again, and we will not leave a stone unturned in our endeavours to find your wife and child. Be

comforted; you will find them, I feel sure of that."

"But if they are dead?"

"No! they are not dead; and you will find them! Good-bye, now, good-bye. I would stay, but you know why I cannot any longer. But you will find them. I feel as sure of that as I feel sure and know that there is a God in Heaven! O! pray that you may, Cunliffe, and I will pray; and pray for me, too, and for mine!"

There were tears in his eyes as he went away; but the look on his exalted face brought hope and spiritual life to the miserable man, who was in such utter need of both. He rallied, physically, from that day; and even tried to pray as Lee had shown him,—praying that he might overcome his frightful temper, and that his sins might be forgiven him.

He thought of Lee with incessant, loving appreciation.

"'Twas he showed me how to pray," he

added, as a kind of supplement, when he had stumbly concluded the first prayer and the first confession he had made for twenty years. "'Twas Lee showed me how to," went on his supplementary appeal to the God of men and angels. "So don't forget him, Lord, and bring his little boy round, too."

This prayer of his was granted, unknown to him, before it even had been offered, together with his own sad needs, to Heaven.

Alexandra met her husband on the threshold, when he came home, that day, her finger uplifted, and she, herself, trembling with joy and exultation. Her eyes sparkled; her face was flushed. She greeted him with a little, sobbing laugh.

"O, Angel, come in quietly," she whispered. "He's asleep, and's taken a good turn. The doctor's been, and says he's better, and, if he gets no worse, he'll get better till he's quite well and strong."

"He—he said that?" Lee stammered.

She nodded, timidly, almost afraid of what she saw in his colourless face.

"O! God is very good!" cried the scripture reader, unsteadily; and then, for some time, could say no more. With softer tread than ever Alexandra could achieve, even with her own dainty feet, he approached the bed on which his child lay placidly asleep.

Flip rose from his post by the bedside, when the man drew near, and licked his hand. Ahkee's babyish face had lost its roundness, its roses and its bloom; but he was smiling while he slept, and, in his smile, health and recovery seemed to shoot out tender buds. His thin, little arm lay outside the covering, and his tiny, shrunken fist made Lee speechless, for awhile. Alexandra stared, timidly, by turns at her baby and her husband's bowed head.

"You would take on, Angel, if you had to give him up altogether, wouldn't you?" she

faltered, presently. "And I—I couldn't bear it either," she added, in a voiceless whisper; "he's my own baby—my own baby!"

Lee drew her closer to him, and, hand in hand, they knelt in eloquent silence, looking at Ahkee, through tear-dimmed eyes. Until Ahkee, himself—an Ahkee of weak, little wrinkles and weaker smiles—woke up and held out his arms to Lee.

"God has given me back my little son," thought the man, reduced to the tremulous weakness of a child. "He has had pity on my sorrow, and has forgiven me my sin, at last."

CHAPTER XII.

FLIP LEAVES THE SCRIPTURE READER'S HOME.

ONE summer evening, a month or two after Ahkee's illness had taken a favourable turn, Lee, coming home, missed something from the limited establishment, yet could not, the first moment, imagine what it was.

His eyes dwelt lovingly on Ahkee, rolling disconsolately about the rug. Ahkee was a second and slightly larger edition of his first round, rosy self, and his general behaviour was what his mother called "obstruperous". Then Lee discovered what he missed.

"Why, Alexandra," he cried, "wherever is old Flip?"

At first, there was no answer. Alexandra

was in the inner room, fussing in a cupboard. She called out, 'at last, from its depths :

"O, his master's been here and taken him away."

"His master!" ejaculated Lee. "Do you mean Cunliffe?"

"I suppose it was him. Said he was Cunliffe, and had come for the dog," was the sharp, muffled reply. "Looked sick, anyway, and walked with a stick."

"Yes, I suppose it was he," said Lee, inwardly marvelling. "I knew he was going out some day this week."

He stepped into the inner room.

"Well, dear," he said to Alexandra, who appeared inextricably tangled in the contents of the cupboard, "tell me—come out of that hole, and tell me what he said."

"Said!" fretfully returned a stifled voice. "What on earth should he say?"

Lee looked rather blank.

"Didn't he say he was going to come again when he found I was out?" he asked.

"Surely he said and did something besides announcing himself as Cunliffe, and taking away the dog. How did he come in? Won't you tell me, Alexandra?"

"Came in through the door, like you or any other man," replied Alexandra, pertly. "He knocked fust, if you want to know."

"Well?"

"Well?"

"But what did he say? Did he know who you were? I wish you would leave those brooms alone, dear. Ah! you will have them all come clattering down again if you put 'em there! Did Cunliffe know you were Mrs. Lee?"

"He didn't think I was Miss Lee," retorted Alexandra, with the pert intonation that concealed a growing agitation on her part.

"Well, and I suppose old Flip was overjoyed to see him, and he to see his dog, and he took himself off, after a little conversation on both sides, eh? Did you

show him Ahkee, Alexandra? He was always particularly anxious to see him, poor fellow! He is extremely taken with little children. Dear, what a fearful racket you are making!"

"O, Angel, I'm busy, and you worrit me," wailed Alexandra, from the recesses of the cupboard.

"H'm—I think you might give me a quarter of the attention you are bestowing on those brooms and things!—But what did he say to Ahkee? Did you tell him he can all but say 'Daddy'?"

"You'll kill me with your worryings!" came, passionately, from behind a pile of dusters.

"Well, I won't worry you any more," he said, disappointed at her uncommunicative mood. "But do you mind telling me this? When did he say he would come here again?"

"He won't come here again."

"Won't come again? Why, we are great

chums, he and I! And I particularly want to see him. I think I have heard of something that might bring a great happiness to him."

"Well, he won't."

"You must have mistaken him!"

"He gave a message," broke in Alexandra, hurriedly. "'Twas this, 'thank Mr Lee for lookin' after my dog so well and all his kindness, and bid him good-bye for me; for I'm off to Australia to-night, and never'll come back no more'."

"What an extraordinary message!"

"Well, that was it! If you don't like what he says, don't stand there staring at me like a fool!"

"To Australia! Alexandra, dear, are you sure? He never said a word of that to me."

"If you misdoubt my word you'll hate me next," said Alexandra, squeezing out some tears.

They seemed to bring relief.

"I don't doubt your word, my dear," Lee said, baffled and completely mystified, after an interval of puzzled thought. "But I think you have misunderstood him. I know he would not go without seeing me; and when he has seen me I do not think he will ever go—whatever he may think now. He will call again, Alexandra, before the week is out."

But Cunliffe did not call.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SWEETBREAD.

It was during this summer that certain extravagant ideas sprang into being, and mastered Alexandra's earlier thrifty habits. She did not grumble at her poverty, but showed appalling disregard for it. She demanded impossible luxuries for herself and baby; and when Lee shook his head, and laughed (with more than a suspicion of sadness in his laughter), she did not fly into a passion, but launched out into grandiloquent accounts of past glories; compared them (to their advantage) with the present state of household economics, which she was pleased to call "squalid," —(she had considerably enlarged her limited vocabulary, and amended her pronunciation,

during her intimacy with the well-read scripture reader;)—and openly bragged of her intention to enjoy a future of the same imperial scale of splendour as the past.

“For what we are, we are very well off,” Lee would say, prosaically. “My wages are enough, thank God! to keep a home for you and Ahkee. And, before my working days are over—which will not be, I hope, till the breath has left my body—our son will be helping his old Daddy to lay by big sums in the bank. Won’t you, Ahkee?”

Ahkee kicked out his fat legs, and grabbed his father’s hand, murmuring his favourite refrain, “Ahkee! Ahkee!” Lee’s words were lightly spoken, but his heart was heavy. He was weak-minded enough to think there was nothing in the world too good for Alexandra and Ahkee.

Therefore, when Alexandra harped on the lovely velvet coats and caps, in the shop windows, and said how beautiful their

boy would look in them, he frowned. When she declared she could not eat pork and onions, but could fancy a sweetbread, he was, at first, aghast, and then became depressed. He had never seen a sweetbread, so far as he could recollect, and was sceptical of Alexandra's greater knowledge of the dainty.

"Bless you, I've eaten 'em scores o' times, in the past," said she, with a toss of her pretty head.

Whenever Alexandra said "in the past" (and she said it very often, now) her voice assumed a tone that suggested a three-volume novel, at the least.

Her last assertion was hardly accurate, but Lee was unable to refute it, even had he been inclined. Inwardly he sighed, but outwardly he preserved his serenity. On his way home, that day, after a temperance meeting at the vicarage, he turned into a butcher's shop and asked boldly for a sweetbread.

The butcher doubted that there was one in the shop, inquired, and found there was; then handed it to Lee, with the staggering remark:

"Three-and-six, please, sir."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Lee; "have you none cheap—smaller?"

The butcher smiled, pityingly, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Take it or leave it, it's all one to Us! But three-and-six is the price for sweetbread in this establishment," said his action.

Lee clenched his teeth, and wondered whether he had the right to be called a temperate man; since he was resolved to buy Alexandra a sweetbread, even if he should have to live on bread and cheese, for the remainder of the quarter.

He produced his every coin, and the entire yield of all his pockets fell short of three-and-six by twopence-halfpenny. Despair was so visibly written in every feature

of his face, that the butcher softened, and with the remark that he would stretch a point for the welfare of humanity (in his own circle he was deemed a wit), pushed the sweetbread into the scripture reader's hand.

Lee, with adoring eyes, watched Alexandra eat it. It was not till the last mouthful was disposed of, that the torturing doubt arose whether he had done rightly, after all, in buying it.

It was some months after this little episode, and the winter was well set in, when Lee, who for some time had been vaguely conscious of a change in Alexandra, realised, somewhat suddenly, that his wife had, in one respect, at least, undergone a remarkable transformation.

What first made Lee conscious of this transformation was a Christmas entertainment, including a Christmas-tree and children's party, held in the parish schoolrooms. Lee, who, in and out of office hours, was

an able coadjutor of the master and the mistress, assisted in the preparations.

On the evening of the entertainment, when everything was ready at the school, Lee returned home, to fetch his wife and child. Then Alexandra announced, quietly, that she was not going.

"Not going!" Lee cried, unable to believe his ears. He knew that any entertainment, however humble it might be, was like the salt of life to her.

She was sitting by the fire, lazily stitching a new frock for Ahkee.

"You cannot be well!" cried Lee, in extreme dismay; "you have been talking all the week about the party, and now you won't go."

"I'm perfectly well," she answered, testily, not troubling to raise her eyes to his perturbed face. "But I don't want to go, Angel, and—I—won't."

When Alexandra settled on a course of action, argument would as soon have moved

a rock as have turned her from her purpose. Lee saw that her determination was unalterable.

"You are not well, my darling," he said, tenderly. "I will not go either. You must not be left alone."

"I am well." She frowned and wriggled, when he touched her forehead. "O! don't worry me, Angel! I want to be alone, indeed, I do! I'm quite, quite well. And I wish you'd go."

She was inflexible, both in her resolve to stay behind, and her desire that he should leave her.

"I do not believe you can be well," he said, miserably.

She laughed, and her laugh was very reassuring. Lee's face brightened.

"Well, if it is only a whim of yours, I'll go, and leave you alone," he said, doubtfully; "sure you are well, darling?"

"O! you old silly!

"H'm! well, may I take Ahkee? He would like it so much."

"If you like," she said, indifferently. But her eyes that followed Lee, carrying the child away, muffled up in worsted, were full of hunger and despair.

CHAPTER XIV.

ALEXANDRA'S VISITOR.

LEE had not been gone for more than twenty minutes when Alexandra had a visitor, in the person of Flip's master. Apparently she was expecting him, for, when he entered, she showed no surprise, but ran to him and threw herself upon his breast.

"O! Charlie!" she cried, and broke out sobbing as though her heart would break. "Charlie—Charlie!"

Cunliffe held her to him, without a word, until the sobbing fit had passed. He looked older and thinner than when Lee had left him in the hospital, six months before; and misery and despair were written in every line of his face, and in his sunken eyes.

"Well, I got your letter, Ally," he said, at
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last, in a voice that quivered, painfully, "and I came. Here I am, you see."

"Did you go out, really," asked Alexandra, in a breathless whisper, "to Australia?"

"Did you not tell me to?" he answered, fiercely, and trembling from head to foot. "Am I not your poor slave?"

"And came back all those thousands of miles across the seas?" she went on, excitedly.

"You wrote to me and told me to come back; so I did. And you knew I was in Australia; I gave you my address, as you told me, and you wrote to it."

"And came back all along o' my little letter?"

He bowed his head and groaned.

"What do you want of me?" he said.

"O, Charlie! my poor lad! Did you come all that long, long way, just because I wrote to you to come?"

He raised his head and looked at her,

beseechingly, until she was obliged to turn her face away.

"Don't pretend you don't know I'd go straight through hell at your bidding," he cried, impetuously.

"Do you love me so, Charlie, still?"

He held out his arms to her, imploringly. She backed slowly from him.

"O! my girl! my own Ally! I thought my heart was broken when first I lost you; but when I did find you at last—my God!—I found it could break still further."

"Would you have taken me away then, Charlie, if I'd have let you?"

"If God Himself had said 'you shall not,' I'd have taken you away!" he cried.

"You didn't ask to, for all that, then," pouted Alexandra.

"No; you made it so clear that you could not or would not leave—that—other man, and the time for making you had passed. Besides, I don't think I was quite right in my senses; I was stunned. I deserved what

had happened, and I knew it. I sometimes think I am stunned still," he went on, sadly. "I live in a dream ; and all day long and all night long I always see you in my dreams. You never leave me, Ally. And when we came into dock, late this afternoon, I saw you standing, all in white, and shining out of the darkness, on the pier-head ; and I thought it was your own living image—your very self."

"What was it?"

"I do not know. Something in my brain, I suppose," he said, drearily.

Then there was silence between these two, so long parted, and met again, for the second time, since that parting, under such tragic circumstances.

"Won't you sit down, Charlie?" faltered Alexandra, at last.

"Where is he?" said Cunliffe, glancing round.

"Gone out for the evenin'. Don't talk of him!"

"I don't want to talk of him. When I think of what he was to me, I feel I'd like to die, and have done with all my wretchedness. And when I think of what he's keeping me away from, I feel I'd like to have my hands upon his throat."

"O! don't talk of him!" she cried again, with a frightened look at his pale, stormy face. "He hasn't done you any harm, to know it! You wouldn't hurt him!"

"Well, I feel like Cain whenever I think of him and you and the baby. O! where is he? Where is my boy, my own boy?"

"Don't take on bad here," groaned Alexandra. "*He's* got him out to a party, safe and well."

"Does he—can he say 'Daddy,' outright, now?"

"He can say a great deal more'n that now," she laughed, bitterly. "Lee's taught him all sorts o' talk, and he's cute as cute

to pick up words. He trots on his tiny toes, now, and puts up his mouth for kisses. He says, 'I loves my Daddy.' Lee taught him."

"Do you want to drive me mad, outright?"

"No, Charlie—No! My poor boy! Hush! Do you belong to me still?"

"Should I be here if I didn't? Should I have done your bidding and left you with Lee when I found you again, if I hadn't belonged to you, body and soul?" he replied, hoarsely. His lips were deathly white, and his eyes yearned, hungrily, miserably.

"Why, I might have killed you when I first knew what you'd done," he went on, "or else taken you away—but I obeyed you! As I'd obey you now, if you bid me either jump head first into the river, or kill Lee!"

"Hush, hush! Don't talk so loud. Do you love me still?"

"Would I be here—at your feet . . . if I didn't?"

"Don't cry so, darlin'," she faltered, abashed by the magnitude of his despair.

"D'you know why I wrote to you?"

"N—no."

Alexandra said nothing for a minute. Then she asked, in a voiceless undertone :

"Will you take me to Australia with you, Charlie?"

He leaped to his feet and took her in his arms, then fiercely pushed her from him, in one throbbing breath of time.

"Yes—No! No!! No!!!" he cried, staring at her with eyes in which terror struggled, visibly, with exultation. "I daren't—I can't—there's that other man! Why, God would strike us dead!"

"But don't you want me?" she cried, bewildered; her cheeks were blanched with dreadful apprehension, her eyes dwelt, desperately, on his changeful face. "Why,

“I was your wife first, by law ; and if there’s one right thing in it all,” she added, incoherently, with a sob, “it is that you and me and baby should go away together, and live as we were rightly wed and meant to live by law.”

“But—but why didn’t you ask me to take you away when we met before, Ally? Why did you say then, ‘If you don’t go, and say nothing to Lee, I’ll take baby and jump in the river’? Why—why did you?” he stammered, aghast at her amazing perversity.

“I—don’t—know. I’d—I’d left off carin’ then. Now I loves you.”

“I know better,” he retorted, bitterly. “You don’t know what loving is.”

“What a wicked, cruel lie!” sobbed Alexandra, passionately. “Why did you come here back if you don’t want me?”

“Because you told me to!” Again that trembling seized him. “You don’t care for me worth a button,” he went on, doggedly,

after a pause. "But the trouble is, I do care for you. I'd not only go to hell for you, but I actually am there, and I'd stay there, for your sake only. Which is more than your preaching lover would do," he added, savagely.

"I've been married to him at a register," said Alexandra, timidly.

"What!!!" he shouted.

His agitation frightened her.

"I—I thought if a year and a day passed, Charlie, 'twould be all right,—I did indecd," she protested, tearfully. "I wouldn't marry him before, not though he begged on his bended knee; and he did, time and time again. But I thought, if you and me was parted for a year and a day, I could marry again all right and lawful. O! indeed—indeed I did!"

Her sincerity in making this assertion could not be doubted. Her simplicity was none the less amazing.

"A year and a day!" cried Cunliffe, with

a gesture of despair. "O! you've got things into a tangle, my girl, that it'll take all God's wits, Himself, to undo this time!"

"Can he have the law, Charlie, on me, for marryin' again?"

"He? Who?"

"Lee."

"Lee! I am not thinking of him. But if you have been really and truly married to him, God have pity on him! And on you, too! Do you know they call it bigamy?"

"O! take me away, Charlie!" she cried, clinging to him like some hunted creature. "Don't let the police get hold of me! I didn't know 'twas against no law! I thought 'twas a right, true marriage. O! I did, I did!"

"O, I guess I'll take you away. You can know how I love you by this—I don't trust you! You asked me to take you away before you spoke of your second marriage, and said you were my wife by law. Now you say you believed—and I believe you

did—that you were Lee's lawful wife. You are a mass of deceit!"

"I'm so frightened! O! I'm so frightened!"

"Yes, that's true enough," he said, half tenderly, half bitterly. "Well!—you're all I've said; and yet—and yet ——"

"There's many a poor soul has swung for less than you've done, Ally," he pursued, drearily; "and yet, and yet ——"

She clung to him, still weeping bitterly, and he held her long in his arms.

"And yet you are my wife—my very own wife!"

"An' you're my boy, Charlie! O! I never, never cared for him like you."

"Is that true?"

"May God strike me dead if it isn't!"

"Poor Lee! poor fellow!"

"Why d'you say that? He's got your boy! I thought you wanted to kill him."

"Not now. Don't you see? I have

got you, at last, and I'll never let you go, now!"

"And Charlie?"

"What is it?"

"I'm meanin' baby, his name's Charlie, too; but we calls him Ahkee, because he says 'Ahkee, Ahkee,' all day. What about him? I must—O! I must have my baby!"

"Of course we must! Does—does Lee care for him very much?"

"Like he does me—he worships me."

"I suppose this serves me right," groaned Cunliffe. "O! it's no use asking you, I know. You couldn't have acted straight, I suppose, if you had foreseen all this horrible tangle; but why—why didn't you tell Lee everything that first night he found you?"

"I don't know," wailed Alexandra. "O! I was afraid!"

"Of what?"

"Of everybody. Of you, and him, and everybody!"

"But you have some common-sense. I can understand you being afraid that night; but why didn't you come back later?"

"I daren't then! Lee had got me."

"Good God! You are not serious! If you had told him he would have let you go."

"O! but I was afraid of him, then Charlie. I'd told him lies the first night."

"I see," he said, grimly; "and perhaps you didn't care."

"I didn't care anything. I was' deadly afraid of both of you," she sobbed.

"Ah! and after?"

"I—I didn't seem to care one way or t'other, till you came back; and then I had to think and think how I could get away."

"And that took six months to think out?"

"O! I wish I was dead."

Strange as it may seem, the girl now spoke the truth, without the slightest gloss or reservation—perhaps for the first time

in her life. She had expressed herself with absolute exactitude in saying that she did not know why, at their first meeting, she had kept from Lee the causes of her loneliness and grief. Again she spoke the truth in saying that she had been afraid, both of her husband and of the man she had impulsively deceived.

Cunliffe did not understand her. Such as she are loved, though they might rather be dreaded ; but they are never understood.

"When will you take me?" asked Alexandra, uplifting her big, pleading eyes.

Hers was a beauty that might enflame the coldest heart ; and although one might doubt whether she had a soul, two men, at least, would have died to keep her love.

"A steamer leaves dock the day after to-morrow, for Sydney," replied Cunliffe, hoarsely. Now that he looked intention fully in the face, it seemed dreadful beyond imagining. He was thinking of the other's loss more than of his own gain. "I will

get the places. Can you be ready, Ally? It will be a cold starting for you and the baby, but you will not rough it when once we're landed. I am a man of means, now, in a big business that's paying well, and I will try to make you happy."

His heart was aching for another word of love, as it had never ached before. Then Alexandra played her last stroke, and, by it, won her husband to her side, for ever.

She put her arms around his neck, and drew his face downwards, until it lay against her own.

"I don't want your means, Charlie," she said, softly. "I want you, only—you, you, you! When I saw you again, last time, my heart was most broke for wantin' you, and not bein' able to manage it then. If you were starvin', I'd beg to go with you. If you were blind and deaf and dumb and lame and ugly and old, I'd beg to go with you! If you hate me"—a sob broke from her—"as much as you despise me—O! you do

despise me, for all your love, I see!—I'd beg still to go with you and try to win your love and trust!"

God alone knew whether she spoke truly in this. Cunliffe was dreadingly content to let the matter rest. He kissed her lovely, pleading lips.

"How will you tell him, Alexandra?"

Cunliffe's troubled voice broke in upon her own cheerless thoughts. She was brooding over the same problem.

"I—I don't know. I daren't tell him! Won't you?"

"I'd do most things for you, my unfaithful wife," he replied, grimly; "but I'll not do that."

"Well, *I* won't," she sobbed back, passionately.

Each looked into the other's joyless face. On both was written an unimaginable dread.

"I'd die sooner," said Alexandra, in a lifeless whisper.

"This is hard," she then heard Cunliffe say, as if in a dream. "This is hardest of all."

"When will you come and fetch me?" asked Alexandra, hurriedly, seized with a new idea.

"I shan't come and fetch you. I won't come here again. You must come to the docks. I will be waiting at the outer entrance. You know the day?—the day after to-morrow—five in the afternoon. But, about telling Lee?"

"Can't I—O! can't I slip away and say nothing, Charlie?"

He looked at her, dimly, and shook his head. His mouth quivered.

"You can't do that. Write!"

Hope came back to her.

"Yes, I can do that. Write a letter and leave it on the table when he's out, and slip away. He'll be out all the afternoon at the church or schools, decoratin' 'em. It'll be Christmas Eve, Charlie!"

Cunliffe gasped. He seemed distressed for want of breath.

"What shall I say, Charlie?"

"The truth," he said, bitterly, "the whole horrible truth from the beginning to the end—mind! the whole of it. Say how frightened you were, and that when you had begun to deceive him, you found you couldn't leave it off. But you can put all the blame on me."

"Don't make me say Ahkee is not his boy," she pleaded. "That 'ud break his heart, outright."

"I don't doubt it, for a minute; but you'll have to say it, all the same. And Ahkee goes with us, or I go alone."

"O! he'll hate me, I guess, after this—bitter."

"Pray God he may!" groaned Cunliffe. "He'll bear it better then."

He drew out his watch, and, finding it was late, bade her good-bye.

"I wish I dared to stay," he said,

miserably. "I want to see my little boy so much. Thought of him's been driving at my heart all these last months, and you don't know how it's hurt me, every time. But I s'pose I'll have to wait. Mind you bring him, Ally! And you won't forget the letter, either? Five o'clock at the docks, day after to-morrow."

"It's been a dreary, dreary life for me, these last two years," sobbed Alexandra, catching him by the sleeve when he was going. "I've thought of you so much! Won't you give me one more kiss before you go?"

He came back and kissed her.

"I expect you've been forgetting me more often than remembering me, these last two years; and I don't reckon they've been so dreary to you as you think," he said, with a cheerless laugh. "I guess I'm like all other men! I guess I would forgive you, if you wronged me a thousand times more cruelly than you have.

I guess Lee, too, will find he'll have to forgive you—if he's able to think it all out quietly—God help him! Now I'll go!”

He went out, abruptly; but a moment later, she was startled to see him once more in the doorway. His white, wretched face filled her with fresh dismay.

“I forgot,” he said, unsteadily. “I mean I never thought—thinking of how I loved you and wanted you, and how Lee would feel. But I forgot about you.”

“What about me?” asked the bewildered Alexandra.

“We must have our little Charlie with us,” he proceeded, with a troubled air that increased his wife's perplexity. “And I can't, all in a minute, figure out how we're to get him. Because, of course, you must come away with me, to-night.”

“O! Charlie, why? I can't do that,” she cried, with amazement and dismay.

“Don't you—I mean can you stay—stay here and meet Lee, knowing what you're

going to do?" he stammered, in a voice of such extreme perplexity and horror, that Alexandra felt bound to shed a few tears, in self-defence, and wept, accordingly.

"O! I must stay!" she cried, with dreary emphasis. "He shan't know anything from me. I'll write that letter, but I won't leave it till I go! O! I must stay here to fetch Ahkee properly away."

"I only thought you couldn't—that's all," he said. He backed out of the room again, and closed the door behind him, with a bang.

"Well, God Almighty!" he cried, with almost vindictive blasphemy, when he was once more in the street, "You made this woman—this wife of mine, and I guess You aren't astonished at *Anything* she does! But she's knocked me off my feet, this time!"

Alexandra, left alone, cast dreary glances round the small, shabby room. A sad smile displaced her look of gloom, at the reflection

that her husband was a man of means, and in a position to gratify her every wish. But the recollection of his sorrowful face filled her with misgivings for their future happiness, until such time should come when he should cease to think of the lonely scripture reader with affection and remorse.

“Poor boy!” she thought, dropping a tear of sympathy for Cunliffe; “I’ll make him happy all I can, so’s he’ll forget the sooner. How unhappy he looked, and how thin his poor cheeks were, and his pretty, curly hair was all fallen from his forehead—poor boy!”

CHAPTER XV.

"GOOD-BYE, DADDY!"

IT was early in the afternoon of Christmas Eve, and Lee was swinging Ahkee in the air, while Alexandra pretended to brush dust from the scripture reader's coat. By now, Ahkee could stagger about on his feet, and, each day, the liberties he took with his mother tongue, increased in volume and directness.

But he was still small and round and very soft; still wrinkled up his fascinating nose, and sneezed out his assent; and it was still a daily joy to him to crawl up Lee's leg and body, beginning with his slippered foot, and persisting in his patient, clinging, crawling efforts, until he had perched him-

self, triumphantly, on the scripture reader's shoulder.

Ahkee's conversation now included several set phrases, and a bewildering multiplicity of euphonious sounds. Lee kissed the child, who was softly murmuring, in his ear, his thoughts on life in general; and, being due back at the church, which he was lending a helping hand to decorate, said, holding up Ahkee till his baby mouth was on a level with his own:

"Say, 'Good-bye, Daddy, and God bless you,' there's a good boy!"

"Dood eye, Tadder, un Dod besser," gabbled Ahkee, cheerfully, and gracefully bent in his toes until they were tucked in under the infatuated scripture reader's chin.

"He speaks more plainly every day!" cried Lee, with sparkling eyes. "Now, go on, Ahkee."

"Don," said Ahkee, proud of his first success.

"No, no," — coaxingly — "what comes

next? What does Ahkee say now, after 'God bless you'?"

Ahkee's neck sank, meditatively, into his fat shoulder, and his brown head fell forward against the scripture reader's cheek. His mouth drooped.

"Ahkee . . . sezen"

"No, Ahkee's not said it yet. Ahkee say, 'Come back soon, Daddy'."

Ahkee's eyes brightened. "Tum ack oon, Tadder!"

Alexandra turned her head away. Her eyes were unnaturally bright, and her lips were pinched and drawn. She had told Lee she was suffering from a cold; but said nothing of the hysterical attacks that, occurring in his absence, caused her feverish expression.

Lee kissed her long and lovingly before he went, and bade her, with tender insistence, be careful of herself; saying that he would return in time to get tea ready, and that she was not to tire herself with doing

anything—he would do everything, himself when he came home, he said.

And then he kissed Ahkee once more (who tearfully held out his little arms, because he so adored the man he could not bear to part from him), and then he took himself away.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FUGITIVES.

WITH the twilight, a cold wind arose, and blew, aimlessly, about the city. Alexandra, blown from side to side of the street down which she hastened, drew her shawl more closely round the animated bundle she held against her shoulder. Another larger bundle hung from her arm, and bumped against her side with every step. This contained their clothes.

When she reached the end of the street, a man came forward from the shadow of a doorway. It was Cunliffe, and she, almost before she was aware of it, was in his arms.

"O, Charlie! how you frightened me!" she gasped, when she had recognised him.

Cunliffe clasped her, tremulously.

"Is that Ahkee you've got?" he whispered, huskily. "Give him to me and take my arm. O! give him to me, and your bundle, too."

The two bundles were consigned to Cunliffe, and the man drew in his breath, sharply. Alexandra caught hold of his arm, and they went quickly down the street, together.

"He'll not be smothered, will he?" he presently asked, pressing the smaller bundle closer to him, and trying to peer into a round bonnet that seemed to have no front or back, but to be only a large, woollen honeycomb.

"Not he!" panted Alexandra. "I've only wrapped him up for the cold. That's a shawl over the bonnet. See his bright eyes shining through the holes!"

Cunliffe saw, and again came that quick intake of his breath.

"Why did you meet us here?" asked Alexandra, almost breathless with sup-

pressed excitement, and the speed that they were making.

"I couldn't wait! Was afraid you might not come, after all. Have you written that letter?"

"Yes."

"That's true now? On your oath?"

"I swear it's true! O, Charlie, when do we start?"

"To-morrow, at ten sharp. Did you say where you're going?"

"Didn't say anything about what docks; but said you were going to take us to Australia."

"When will he read it?"

"To-night, when he comes in. O! Charlie!"—she began to whimper with fatigue and fear. "I can't go so fast! You're running me off my feet."

He pulled up, abruptly. "I feel like a felon," he said, in a choked voice.

"There's no call for you to," she re-

plied tearfully; "you're only takin' away what's your own."

"Yes; taking away my own, but doing it like a thief. Are you cold? You're shivering. Lean more on me, Ally. Are you very tired? We haven't far to go, darling. Why, what's that?"

"What's what?" cried Alexandra, alarmed at his change of tone.

"That buzzing—well, I declare!"

She laughed, and wiped away a starting tear.

"Why, that's Ahkee talking to himself behind the shawl. Hark to him, Charlie! He'll talk all night, sayin' 'Ahkee' and then 'Daddy'—listen!"

Cunliffe bent his head, and a spasm crossed his handsome face.

"God! it seems such an infernal shame!"

"What d'you say, Charlie?"

"O, nothing! We turn down here, where those lights are twinkling ahead. We'll get

on board at once. . . . Sure you want to come?"

"O! O! You're never going to leave me behind?"

"Don't start crying, for pity's sake! Of course I'm going to take you with me."

"Thought you weren't," sniffed Alexandra, penitentially.

"You'll have a lot to bear with me, my lass," he slackened his hurrying pace to say, remorsefully.

"How?" she whispered, fearfully.

"Well, my temper, for one thing. I've been trying to master it, really and truly, since I better realised what devil's work it did for me and mine; but it masters me sometimes, still."

He sighed heavily, but there was no more time for conversation, and still less for regret. It was not a long business to get Alexandra and the child on board, and settled in their cabin, but it entailed some trouble.

Alexandra had become hysterical. Ahkee, divested of his remarkable bonnet, had curled himself into a ball, and fallen asleep. Cunliffe hung about the cabin, with a despondent air and a white, disturbed face.

"O, throw down that truck!" he said, abruptly, to his wife, who was feverishly ordering her own and Ahkee's clothes, "and come to me."

Disobedience was not a fault of Alexandra's. She came at once, submissively, and knelt down by his side.

"What's troublin' you, Charlie?"

He made no direct reply. "It would have been a squarer thing to have told Lee, beforehand, and said good-bye, honestly," he said, reluctantly.

She stared at him with frightened eyes, and shuddered.

"Instead of sneaking off like two wretched criminals!"

"Don't!" she pleaded. "I don't want to feel bad any more about it. I've bin feelin'

awful all these last days. And, if you feel bad like this, you'll make me."

But, even with his wife safe at his side, and his child lying quietly asleep before his eyes, and the steamer timed to start for a new world within twenty-four hours, Cunliffe could not detach his remorseful thoughts from the scripture reader's lonely home.

"I can't help hoping he'll come before we start," he said, once. And when Alexandra turned a scared face and two reproachful eyes upon him, he added, with more emphasis than she appeared to think necessary :

"You may say what you like, and look how **you** please! I'd rather he found us here, and saw us start, and cursed us straight to hell when we did start—aye, though he came down for that purpose, and none other!—than slip off like this, without one word or sign from him."

But Cunliffe hoped in vain ; and Alexandra breathed again when the last gangway was up and in, the last rope was

hauled on board, and the steamer, having cast off her moorings, forged slowly out of dock.

"We're off, thank God!" said Alexandra; and the exclamation came from her heart.

She hung upon her husband's arm, while Ahkee danced, unsteadily, up and down, in front of them, demanding to be lifted up to see the world.

Cunliffe's glances travelled restlessly over the people on the quay; but the scripture reader's well-known form was not among them. He sighed. His wife noticed his silence and his sigh, and resented both.

"You're not—sorry—for what you've done?" she asked him, with a tremor in her voice.

He bent to take Ahkee in his arms, and turned aside, so that his wife should not see his face.

Ahkee had cried, that morning, when he called "Daddy," and Lee did not appear.

Now he had forgotten him, for the moment, and was engrossed in what was going on in the new world in which he found himself. He chattered, softly, when Cunliffe raised him up and sat him on his arm; and, in an ecstasy of enjoyment of the air and brightness, and the noise and dancing waters, tucked his soft head, rapturously, under Cunliffe's cheek.

"You're not—sorry you've got us?" faltered Alexandra.

He turned quickly to her.

"Sorry? God! No! Never think that!" Then he looked, distressfully, first at Alexandra's wistful face, and then towards the departing shore; but his eyes rested, at the last, upon his wife, and he smiled, pressing his son closer to him.

"Good-bye to England and all it holds!—good-bye for ever, Ally!" he said, softly.

She was lost in thought, her eyes intent upon the flowing tide. The sound of bells

broke clearly on the air. He touched her arm.

"What are you thinking of, Ally?"

She did not reply. She was thinking of that moment, two years back, when she first heard the bells of St. Mark's ring out their chimes on Christmas morning.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALEXANDRA'S LETTER.

LEE left the church so soon as he could be spared, which was not till a late hour. He was neither a muscular nor a large framed man, but the hardest part of all parochial work invariably fell to him.

He had a habit of taking on himself, and successfully performing, herculean tasks from which a far stronger man than he might reasonably have shrunk. His coadjutors in the labours of the day were the two curates and their two *fiancées*, Hall's sisters, and several others.

The curates were triumphantly elated. They had persuaded the vicar to allow them to hold a midnight service in St. Mark's. Woolcombe, himself, declined

all part in it. "I do not sanction it, neither do I prohibit it," he said, with dignity.

Hall was telling the scripture reader of their victory, when the latter was about to leave the church. Lee, preoccupied with his domestic cares, smiled, vaguely, and moved hastily down the aisle.

"Shall we see you and Mrs. Lee?" asked the curate, anxiously.

But Lee shook his head, with an apologetic smile.

"It's your wedding anniversary to-day, I think," said Hall, in a tone not wholly free from envy; "I suppose you want to keep it at home. But I wish you could have been with us."

Lee struck out, briskly, for his home, forsaking the short cut through narrow alleys, in order to pass down a brightly lighted thoroughfare, in which he had to make a purchase of importance.

This was no household marketing; all that was done by Alexandra. He turned

into a toy-shop, gaily lighted up, brilliantly set out, and smelling, pleasantly, of holly and new toys. He was excited by the unusual gaudiness and glitter by which he found himself surrounded; but serious, almost to solemnity, by the weighty business on his hands.

A shop-assistant languidly came forward.

"I should like to see some animals, if you please," said Lee.

"Wool, fur, skin, wooden, or leather?" drawled the girl.

"Fur, the softest you have," replied Lee, seriously.

"For a kid, I reckon."

"For my baby boy, nearly sixteen months," began Lee, with pride. "It must be soft, and must squeak, and must run on wheels, because he can run now. I think it must be a rabbit."

"Any particular breed?"

Lee laughed, good-humouredly, but said

no more until the rabbits came for his inspection. He stroked them all, tried the vocal powers of all, and ran each one up and down the counter to see which worked most smoothly, the shop-girl yawning audibly the while.

Finally, he selected a white-bodied, brown-eared rabbit, of irreproachably soft fur, that yapped, dismally, and flicked its ears forward, each time the wheels of its stand went round.

"Tie it up tightly, please, in a parcel, so that nothing of it shall be seen," he said, earnestly, holding out his purchase across the counter. The girl stared blankly through him; but handed him, a minute later, a thick, white paper parcel, tied with string. Lee's eyes glistened at the thought of Ahkee's tiny fingers pulling at that parcel to see what Wonder it contained.

So he came home; and, on the mat, outside the partly opened door, there lay a little shoe. It was Ahkee's, and, care-

lessly put on by Alexandra, had dropped off in their hasty flight.

Lee picked it up, and his wonder at the silence of his rooms became astonishment, and then dismay, when he found them both unoccupied. He supposed that Alexandra, despite the chillness of the evening air, and her own cold, had taken Ahkee out to see the Christmas shops ; and, at first, felt vexed at her wilfulness. His next feeling was one of deep regret that he had not earlier come home, and joined them in the little jaunt, if unable to prevail on Alexandra to abandon it.

He laid his precious parcel and Ahkee's shoe upon the sideboard, and, lighting a lamp, began to prepare tea. Then, for the first time, he saw a letter lying on the table. It was the letter Alexandra had written to him, some hours earlier.

He was thrown into a fresh state of astonishment, mingled, now, with some anxiety, and breaking open the envelope, sat down to read what it contained.

And this is what he read:—

“My dear Angel,

“Charlie says as I’m to write all the truth and [I] don’t know how. He’s takin me and little Ahkee to Orstrayleya for we [are] his wife and baby, as I was married to him befor I saw you. I was orful, orful frightened when you found me in the street, two year ago, and thought he would kill me, and didnt want to go back to him, and wanted a home, for I thought Charlie would find me else, and I was deadly frightened. And I thought you was [the] kind of man to make me go back if you knew. So I told a story and said I wasent married when I was. And when I’d told the story I was orful frightened of you then, and when you asked me to marry you I was more frightened and wouldent till a year and a day was gone and I thought [it] was all right then. I did truly and truly thought it was all right by law. But Charlie

says it's not and I'm his wife and no one else's, because I was his wife first, proply married. So he's takin me orf to Orstray-eya, where he's got a lot of money, and will make me and Ahkee a lady he says. Charlie is my husband, Charlie Cunliffe, the man what [you] used for to visit at the Orspital; what was nocked down by a cart once. He came to our house for Flip, and found me; but I wouldent go with him then, and his heart most broke, and he wanted me badly. And I wanted him to [so] I wrote to Orstrayleya, were I'd told him to go, and he came, and now he's takin us away, and we shan't never never come back, cause I'm not your wife really nor Ahkee's not your boy. I can't think of anythink more as I've told you [you] never had no boy at all, never. Little Ahkee my baby and Charlie's. That's why I wanted him called Charles after his Daddy. O dear, I'm cryin, Angel, as I write, cause you have bin very good to me and I've not treeted

you well, but I couldent help lovin my own
own husband best when he comed back, so
miserabul and wantin me so, and my own
baby's Daddy too. So I must go, and
when you read this letter I'll be quite gone,
and you'll never never see me and little
Ahkee agin.

"Charlie says I'm to say it's all his fault,
and he's the one to blame.

"Your lovin ALEXANDRA CUNLIFFE."

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And now there comes a time and a scene
on which it seems it would be less than
pitiful not to drop the curtain. And there
was held to Lee's lips, to drain to the utter-
most, a cup containing so intolerable a
draught that hell's cruellest torture might
be balm to it.

Hour after hour the man sat motionless.
He read the letter through three times before
he could believe it to be other than a fright-
ful jest. Each hour the iron entered further

into his soul ; each hour he drank more deeply of his woe. But there came no light to him across the darkness, and his soul was drifting nearer, with every hopeless hour, to the rock of that damnation that is begat of blasphemy and despair.

To the tragic circumstances that had shattered Love, Life, Hope, Faith, he gave no thought, whatever. He was like one bereft of thought ; and his senses yielded, one by one, to suffering.

A knock broke, dully, on the heavy stillness of the room. The door opened, and the landlady peered, furtively, within. It was a hardly human face that met her frightened gaze. She had staggered up the stairs on a mission of investigation, fearing, by Lee's long silence, and the non-return of Alexandra and the child (whom, with amazement, she had seen depart), that trouble had fallen on her lodger. She backed unsteadily out again, affrighted by the look of irremediable hope-

lessness in Lee's misty eyes, her old blood frozen in her veins by the horrid vacancy of his face.

She heard him say something—his voice was as lifeless as his face. She crept back to the door, and heard him speak again, and then again. In each fresh utterance his voice was more articulate, deeper, more animated, and more human. She listened at the door.

Two minutes later, she tottered to her kitchen, her face all white and scared, her limbs all trembling, her shrivelled hands pressed tightly on her ears.

"O! O! Why didn't God make me stone deaf afore I heard—that?" she wailed, with tears. They were the first that had fallen from her eyes for twenty years. "An' from our scripture reader, too! O! God have mercy on this house this day!"

Then silence fell again upon the house. And in silence one cannot but pass over

that hour of the scripture reader's anguish. One may liken his deserted room to a death-chamber, with all its silent terrors, but without its sacred awe; the gradual re-awakening of Lee's stupefied senses, to a page of tragic misery that would be better left unwritten.

To him, as to the most miserable of men, there came, at last, an hour of recollection; but an hour that should be shared by none but that Compassionate God, to Whom, in his first moments of articulation, he had addressed unutterable blasphemies. Then, he was but slowly coming back from stupefaction, and gave voice to his despair by defying God, Himself. Now, he had awakened into consciousness, and with consciousness came silence. Before the tragic nature of that silence, the very angels might have trembled, affrighted and dismayed.

Then the church bells broke out, suddenly, with harsh and violent insistence,

proclaiming, in the darkest hour of the night, that the Christmas morning was at hand.

With that, Lee rose, unsteadily, and staggered to his feet, just when the clock above the mantelpiece rang out the hour of twelve. Whither his stumbling feet would have taken him; to what dark goal his soul was blindly drifting; into what depths of madness or despair his aimless movement might have precipitated him,—only his Maker and Redeemer knows.

His soulless, black-rimmed eyes fell, inadvertently, on the sideboard, and before the clock had chimed out the last stroke, he had bowed his head over Ahkee's tiny shoe. The white paper parcel (that Ahkee's active fingers would never now unfasten) was clutched and drawn, convulsively, to the same place in which the small strap shoe was pressed. That place was Lee's broken heart.

EPILOGUE.

CHRISTMAS EVE.

THE seasons come and go with a regularity that is less pronounced than fatalistic, and the face of time is left unchanged by their continuous rise and fall. Where years set their irrevocable marks is on the souls of men.

At St. Mark's, time might have stood still a year, so exactly was this Christmas Eve a copy of the last.

All day long, untiring workers were busy in the church, engaged in decoration; and the giving out of Christmas doles, the visiting from house to house, and all the other seasonable duties were carried on, as usual.

Rentworth and Hall, the two curates of St. Mark's, left the church together.

"I wish Woolcombe would speak to Lee," the first began, impetuously, when his friend broke out with:

"D'you know where Lee is, to-night?"

"Gone to those wretched families in Blink's Alley," was the reply.

"Again! Why, he's sat up there the three last nights with those people!"

"I believe a fourth of them are down. Influenza's raging there again. Wish to God Woolcombe would speak to him!"

"Eh! What?"

"Well, Woolcombe ought to put a stop to it! Lee's just killing himself with slaving over folk who, for the most part, don't deserve a quarter of what he does for 'em. Ever since he came back in the summer it's been the same. Hercules couldn't stand the labour he gets through every day."

"O! he's wiry enough, and wiry men never die of overwork."

"H'm! But no machine, still less a man, can run for ever! And he's on the go, both night and day."

"I'll tell you what it is," said Hall, with the air of one propounding an original discovery. "This parish is too big for the whole four of us. And there ought to be two if not four scripture readers for the work."

Rentworth assented, then said, remorsefully, "I often feel a lazy beast, seeing him come tearing round a corner. 'Come in, Lee,' I say, 'to my rooms, and have a chat, a smoke, a bit of supper.' He shakes his head—how rarely he smiles now, poor fellow!—and says he's got a starving family to visit, a club meeting to look in at, a police court to attend, a ticket-of-leave man to put into a place, a drunken man to bring home, or whatever it may be—and shoots off again. The trouble is, I know he's right, and there always is something waiting for him to shove on. Only he carries it too far! he's so confoundedly—h'm! . . ."

"Conscientious," suggested Hall; and they went on, in silence, pondering, remorsefully, over the advantages of having a conscientious scripture reader as their coadjutor.

Turning a corner, into an open square, they met the man they had been discussing.

"Hullo, Lee!" sang out Rentworth, cheerily. "Where to now? Not Blink's Alley again?"

The scripture reader, suddenly brought to, turned his glance, quickly, from one to the other tall, black-coated figure. He passed his hand over his eyes, and, by the simple action, seemed like one who wiped away the slight confusion due to the interruption to his thoughts.

The past year had set few outward signs on him. He was not a man who quickly aged in looks; and a long and serious illness, that had overtaken him in the last winter and the succeeding spring, so far from

having permanently crippled him, appeared to have left him stronger than of old.

The changes in his face were few ; only one was emphasized—the long, deep line between his nostril and his lip. His eyes were more sunken and less bright ; his mouth was hardly so steady as before ; the veins around his temples were darker and more raised ; and his hair was already turning grey.

Some people had expected the infirmity of temper he had almost overcome on that last fatal Christmas Eve, to spring out, afresh, after his illness, and, perhaps, be even more apparent than in his most stormy and hot-headed days. But, so far from that, not one ungentle word was ever heard from him, again ; and his extreme forbearance to all he had relations with, became, at last, a by-word in the parish.

“You are not going to sit up with any more families in Blink’s Alley, are you?” exclaimed the impetuous Rentworth, defin-

ing his first query by this more direct inquiry.

Lee shook his head.

"I am going to Blink's Alley—but not to sit up. A neighbour is coming in, and they will not let me. (A wistful light came into his eyes, and he smiled, unsteadily.) They actually say they will not rest unless I turn in, to-night; they are very good. These poor people are full of goodness and kindness," he added, with a sincerity that was wholly unaffected.

To Blink's Alley, of pestilential reputation, he made his way; and the curates went on their's, which was in an opposite direction. Lee's mission was one purely of alms-giving, and was soon accomplished.

On the way home, he met a little girl he knew, one of the Sunday School scholars of St. Mark's. She was running gaily down the street, singing while she ran.

When she came up to Lee, she ceased her song, to pipe out, lustily:

"Good night, sir! Merry Christmas to you!"

It was his first Christmas greeting since——he could not remember the last time he had been greeted with the old, familiar words! They were like a dagger in his heart.

"Thank you, Mary," he replied, gently, after a convulsive movement of his hands. "And a merry Christmas to you!"

Then both went quickly on again, and Lee chose that side of the pavement where the shadows lay the deepest. But lights from the windows plucked him out of the welcome darkness; and many of the passers by, especially the poorer dwellers in the parish of St. Mark's, greeted their scripture reader as he passed. "Good night, sir! Merry Christmas to you!" they said; and to each and all he returned his gentle thanks and kindred greeting; and each and all inflicted unimaginable torture on his heart.

When he turned into his own dingy street,

and thence into his house, he was like one who holds himself in hand, lest anguish steal a march on endurance, and fortitude be mastered by despair. For all his iron resolution not to think, he could not, in his home-coming, forget the circumstances of the Christmas Eve of three years back.

Even in this home-coming, one momentous past occurrence was repeated. A letter lay upon the table, addressed to "Mr. Angel Lee". It was the first thing he saw when he came in. The address was in Alexandra's writing, and the postmark "Sydney," in Australia.

Lee took it up and looked at it, long; his face was white and drawn, his lips were trembling. After a while, he opened it, and read as follows:—

"Dear Mr. Lee,

"Charlie thinks I ought to write to you, and tell you how I am getting on. He says you might like to know I'm well

and happy. We live in a big house outside Sydney, with a lovely garden, and I can hold my own with all the folks. Charlie's a rich man, and I've learnt to read and write proper. I think you would like to know how little Ahkee is getting on. He is a bonnie boy, and up to all tricks. Never sick, never still a minute, trotting round on his fat, sturdy legs, and such busy little prying fingers, and he still wrinkles up his little nose and talks, talks all day. Charlie says he'd talk a donkey's hind leg off, and laughs. Charlie's awful proud of him. He is a big beauty. Folks take a heap of notice of him, he's that lovely. I've got a baby girl, too, and we call her Alice, such a darling, just like Ahkee was when he was a baby. Charlie is that fond of her. Ahkee said, 'Now I've got a baby as well as a Mammy and Daddy ; now I'm a king' Wasn't that cute? He loves it. He says, 'I loves my Mammy and Daddy and baby *ever so.*' I'm running on so, there's no

stopping when I get talking of them. I forgot. Charlie thinks you would like to know he's turned religious. He goes to church regular, and has prayers in his house ; and he's teaching Ahkee his prayers. Ahkee says, 'God bless Mammy and Daddy, and baby Ally, Christ's sake, Amen!' He looks so pretty saying it!

"Once he cried and got in a temper and kicked and screamed awful, because Charlie was nursing baby, and he wanted Charlie to nurse him ; he tried to smack the baby. Charlie was awful vexed and scolded Ahkee, and wouldn't speak to him ; and Ahkee cried then because he was a bad boy, and said, 'Won't be no bad boy no more. Ahkee sorry ; Ahkee kiss baby!' And then Charlie was glad, and kissed Ahkee, and Ahkee just hugged and kissed him all over. He loves Charlie so, you can't fancy! I said once, to see if he remembered : 'Where's the other Daddy what used to kiss and love Ahkee, and

dress him and wash him, and put him to bye-bye, and play with him, long ago, before Ahkee went on the big ship?'

"And what do you think Ahkee said? 'Don't know no other Daddy, don't know, don't know!' And he has really and truly forgotten all about you, Angel. Isn't that queer? But he's such a little chap, perhaps he can't help it.

"O, dear! I'm running on again. I don't think I've any more to say. O, yes! Charlie tells me to say he hopes you've forgiven me and him. I hope you have, Angel, and I hope you'll marry a good girl what loves you truly, and be very happy all your life.

"This is wishing you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, from Charlie and me.

"Your affectionate,

"ALEXANDRA CUNLIFFE.

"P.S.—Old Flip is quite well, and just worships Ahkee and the baby."

• • • • •

The hour was drawing on towards midnight. Twice the minute hands had gone the circle of the dial, and still Lee had not stirred. Alexandra's letter was spread out before him, on the table.

Three times he read it through, and three times, with misty eyes, and dumb, pleading mouth, he turned him from the bitter cup, and then turned to, and drank again deep draughts of woe from it. By the letter lay a little, worn, strap shoe, and a parcel that had never been untied,—Alexandra's letter, Ahkee's shoe, and the toy rabbit. He laid them out before him, and looked on them long, touching them, softly, one by one. His hand, when it clasped over the little shoe, trembled, piteously.

"I am glad she's happy," he said.

But there was no gladness on his joyless face.

His eyes travelled down the letter, and stopped at Alexandra's plea for pardon.

"I think she must be sure I have forgiven her—all that there was to forgive," he murmured, brokenly. "She was not the only one to be forgiven. But it will make them both happier, perhaps, if I write and say so, in so many words. I will write to-morrow."

And when the morrow came he did not forget to write and assure them he had long ago forgiven any wrong they had unwittingly, or wittingly, put on him.

After he had uttered his resolve to write, there was silence for awhile. It was close upon the stroke of midnight when he read again, from the letter, the part that told him Ahkee had forgotten him.

The strap shoe and Alexandra's letter

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and his own face were hidden in his arms ; and all three were wet with tears.

Then, as in past years, the church bells broke out, suddenly, across the night, to ring in the Christmas morning

THE END.

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